The Hibernian's Successor

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/18344600.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Alana Bloom/Margot Verger
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Alana Bloom, Margot Verger, Will Graham's Father, Francis Dolarhyde, Randall Tier, Will Graham's Mother, Mischa Lecter, Jack Crawford
Additional Tags:	Ancient Rome, Alternate Universe - Ancient Rome, Alternate Universe - Gladiators, Ireland, Character Death, Alternate Universe - Magic, Canon-Typical Violence, Dark Will Graham, Bottom Will Graham, Top Hannibal Lecter, Creampie, Children, Alternate Universe - Gods & Goddesses, Roman Myths, Murder, Bonding, Soul Bond, Hannibal Lecter is a Cannibal, Will Graham is a Cannibal
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of The Hibernian
Stats:	Published: 2019-04-04 Completed: 2019-08-26 Words: 43,189 Chapters: 8/8

The Hibernian's Successor

by HigherMagic

Summary

Two years after Hannibal and Will reunited, Will's father dies, leaving the question of who will lead the tribe through the harsh winter.

Notes

What is UP my dudes it's Wednesday and I'm BACK ON MY BULLSHIT.
One day I'll have self control, and one day the Riverdance soundtrack won't go so fucking hard and light my brain up like a Christmas tree.
So, have a sequel! Soft murder magic boys, lines of succession, and reappearances of some of our old faves!
I hope you guys like it :D Enjoy!

Chapter 1

The winters are much colder in this place than in Roma and all her sandy, sunny cliffs, her rich deserts and spartan forests. In contrast, Hibernia, even covered in snow still-clinging to the mountaintop, is vibrant and alive with foxes, the screeches of owls and hawks circling above him as he prowls through dense forests. The evergreens shift and sway for him, like he is a dog passing between giggling children, their rain-heavy boughs dripping onto his bared shoulders and his hair.

He pauses upon a break in the thicket, crouching down and touching soft mud, in which a single heel print has been laid. He smiles – it is so unlike Will to leave a trail easily followed. More often than not, Hannibal must chase him by scent alone, and he thinks he is aware of Will the same way animals sense rain – something impending, something rich and wild that will leave him trembling.

His eyes lift, and he scans the trees, lips pursed. His gaze shows him nothing. The trunks of the trees are grey and still, frozen in their mid-season afterlife, simply waiting for the sun to spend more time with them, for the clouds to move further north, chasing cold air, and for spring to come.

He hears a step, and a crackle of branches, a second before there is a knife at his throat. Though he was still, before, he freezes further, huffing out a quiet breath as a thumb presses against the flat of the knife, protecting his exposed, vulnerable neck, and the hand holding it jerks, making him life his head.

Will's smile is what he sees first. Second, his eyes, bright and blue as deep water beneath ice. "You rely too much on your eyes," he murmurs, in his native language since Hannibal spent the time they were apart becoming capably fluent in it. He will gladly never speak another Latin word again.

"What should I rely on?" Hannibal murmurs, as Will steps close to him, wet boots worming between his calves to get him to part his knees, relax his stance until he sits on his heels, head tilted up. He turns to the side, smiling when Will takes the knife away, and instead cups his cheek – which Hannibal still keeps clean-shaven, both out of habit and because the humid air makes him itch too much when it grows long.

Will's lips twitch, and he sheaths his knife, leans down and parts his knees to grip Hannibal's flanks as though he were mounting a horse. Pushes close to Hannibal's back, his chest broad and warm and strong, and Will kisses, tenderly, at his cold cheek.

"Your ears," he replies. "What do you hear?"

Hannibal tilts his head. "Nothing."

"Exactly," Will says, and he smiles, no less bright or joyous than he has ever been. It has been two years, now, since Will returned to him, and every day sees him glowing with the same

vibrant life Hannibal saw in his homeland. Will thrives here, in the rivers and lakes and the soft mountain grass.

He kisses Hannibal's cheek again, and rises, tugging Hannibal to his feet. "The forest knows when a predator is inside her, Hannibal. She will tell the deer and the rabbits. You must listen." He goes silent, tilts his head to mimic Hannibal's, and though of course there are no other people except them to sense, Hannibal thinks he might hear the trees whispering to each other. There is magic in this place, and Hannibal thinks it that much stronger for Will's presence. "You must learn to speak to her."

"Forgive me, my love," Hannibal murmurs, always awed when Will starts talking like that. He reaches out, grazes his knuckles along Will's shoulder, and smiles when he shivers. "But the forest has never warned animals of my presence. Maybe she likes me."

"Or she dislikes me," Will finishes for him, teasing, and laughs loud enough that, if there were any lingering quarry nearby, they will have scattered. But it is no matter – this hunt was more for their own amusement than any real need. Since Will's absence, since his return, the place has thrummed with life. Hannibal has never seen so many living creatures outside a pen before – man or beast.

As though summoned by his thoughts, a shadow moves behind Will, melting into the shape of a large, panting dog. It is grey and shaggy, long-legged with an angular face. A fast animal, and one that runs beside Hannibal when he exercises his mare. Will has named him 'Bua', the Hibernian word for victory.

The dog licks its jaws, looking up at them with dark, intelligent eyes, and woofs happily when Will scratches his nails along his head. A single moment of silent command passes between them, before Bua barks again, and slinks off into the dense undergrowth. He is a fine animal, unlike the Roman fighting dogs Hannibal has seen before in temperament – he sits outside their home when Hannibal and Will sleep, and joins them on hunts, but at all other times he is rarely seen.

Will smiles, lets out a quiet hum, and entwines their fingers. He shivers, as the trees do, and presses close to Hannibal's chest. Even beneath their thick clothes, padded shirts and pelts, Hannibal can feel Will's warmth.

"We won't catch anything today," Will murmurs, with a certainty Hannibal no longer questions. He nods, and doesn't resist the urge to nuzzle Will's wild hair, which is now long enough to fall to his neck and encase it when he sweats. For so long, he remembers wanting to see Will wild like this again, and now that he can, he aches for nothing else. Just this, for the rest of his life.

"Would you like to return home?" he asks, but knows, just as Will knows, that they will remain here a while longer. Cold doesn't touch Hannibal like it does a normal man – whether that is Will's magic or not, he is uncertain. Being bonded to a creature like Will means he is always warm in Will's presence, feels more alive than he has ever been, eager to sate his beautiful lover's needs at any moment.

Will's lashes lower, his lips part, and he rests his mouth against Hannibal's jaw, presses as his tongue does, kissing open-mouthed and warm on Hannibal's flushing skin. "We should leave a gift," he murmurs. "To thank the forest for her hospitality."

Hannibal smiles. "Simply tell me how, Will."

Will makes another quiet noise, pressing close, forcefully, until Hannibal has no choice but to fall back against the nearest tree. He cups Hannibal's face, kisses light and lax at his mouth until Hannibal's lips part, letting his tongue inside.

Will trembles against him, strong and warm, and clutches with his free hand at Hannibal's cloak, making it bunch at his waist. He tugs, arching against Hannibal as Hannibal embraces him, their kiss deepening, Hannibal's heart ticking up in a sharp rhythm. Will does this to him with merely a look – so long together, now, Hannibal need only see him to feel that urgent hunger that is Will's love.

Will grips his neck, holding him fiercely as they kiss, and kiss again, and when he pulls back, his eyes hold that familiar ring of gold, separating iris from pupil and making the blue look green. He is beautiful like this, shining beneath his dark hair, and Hannibal sighs, brushing his nose against Will's, digging his nails into Will's shoulders as Will arches and grinds against him.

"Mount me," he breathes, and Hannibal nods, grabbing Will and turning him, pressing him face-first against the tree. Will trembles, gripping with his nails in the bark, sighs heavily as Hannibal tugs his cloak out of the way, pushes at his shirt and trousers until his skin is bare, clothes bunching around his thighs and hips.

Will is almost constantly wet these days, from Hannibal feeding him as often as he's able. It is an act as selfish as it is pleasurable, now, feeding Will – seeing him in moments like this, alight and shaking, well, Hannibal might go so far as to say he's addicted to it. The feeling of Will's magic, the heat of him soaking into Hannibal's skin is something he craves, and would eagerly give himself to – does, whenever Will asks for it.

Still, he fishes the little pouch of fat he keeps on him at all times from his belt, dips his fingers into it to wet them, and pushes them into Will. Will tosses his head back, gasping towards the heavy, water-logged branches, and Hannibal covers him, cloak trapping Will's heat, shielding their bodies from wandering eyes, though there is no one here to watch them.

He thrusts his two fingers in deeply, crooking them to brush that sensitive part of Will that makes him whimper and cry out, smiles, teeth to his lover's neck as Will trembles and snarls, turns his head to nudge his nose to Hannibal's hair. He grips the bark fiercely, working his hips back onto Hannibal's hand, and shivers when Hannibal pulls his fingers out and smears the rest of the fat on his cock, once he pulls it free from his own clothes.

He grips Will's hips, his body slotting easily to Will's, and pushes into him. Will spasms around him, always so tight and blister-hot, a brand all his own that Hannibal eagerly bears every day. He thrusts in deep and quick, pulling air from both of them as his hips connect with Will's flesh, and Will whimpers, closing his eyes, lifts his chin and rests his forehead on Hannibal's shoulder.

They move together as one, slow and familiar. No less passionate, of course – even now, as he closes his eyes, he feels himself swept in the tides of Will's heat, of the sweet clench of his body and the rough, uneven gasps that are punched out of him whenever Hannibal fucks in deep. He slides a hand to Will's hard cock, stroking him in tandem with his thrusts, squeezing the head when he is at his shallowest, dragging down to the base when he fucks in.

Will trembles for him, a soft whine spilling from his throat that sounds more desperate than normal, but Hannibal understands. Will is tied to this place, feels the earth and the trees and the sky, the water within it. He knows when the ground is aching, he knows when the clouds are fit to burst. His eyes open, shining with gold, and Hannibal takes his chin in his other hand, turns him and kisses him harshly, Will's shoulder pressed to the tree to keep himself upright as Hannibal mounts him.

"Oh, *oh*," Will gasps, open-mouthed, wet on the inside, tightening around Hannibal's cock. His eyes widen, lashes fluttering, a tremor running down his spine as Hannibal gets him closer and closer. "Hannibal, oh, *please*."

Hannibal growls, pressing his teeth to Will's neck. "What do you need?"

Will grabs his wrist, scrambling until his nails dig into delicate flesh. Though Hannibal's wounds from Will heal quickly, there remains a silvery scar in the shape of his bite. He kisses over Hannibal's rushing pulse, lets out a weak, questioning moan.

Hannibal understands. He smiles. "Take, Will. I'm willing."

Will shivers, parts his jaws, and sinks his sharp teeth through Hannibal's flesh. Moans, when blood floods his mouth, and it is the brush of his tongue along Hannibal's open skin that finishes him; he snarls, pressing deep with a grunt, and fills his lover as Will shakes so hard his knees threaten to give.

Hannibal will not let him fall. He grips Will's waist tightly with his free arm, holding him by mouth and hips as Will drinks from him, tonguing at the wound. There is no pain, just the outward rush of pleasure from Hannibal's cock and his wrist, and Hannibal closes his eyes, still not quite used to the way the pleasure simply *lasts* when he lays with Will, as though Will's body is pulling every shred of energy it can from him, eager to be full.

He lets Hannibal's wrist drop, gasping heavily, and closes his eyes, whimpering softly as Hannibal keeps touching him, drops his bloody hand to Will's cock and strokes him tight and quick. He trembles, arching, shoulders curling in, and puts his hand over Hannibal's, subtly angling himself so he's pointed towards the tree. When he finishes, he spills over the bark and the tops of the roots, and the tree shivers above them, dripping down cold offerings of lingering rain.

Will smiles when he finishes, opening his eyes which still burn with gold, and Hannibal pulls out, correcting their clothes and embracing Will tightly from behind so he does not get cold. Though he knows Will doesn't feel the cold, just as he doesn't feel it – not like normal men do.

Will slides his fingers over his cock, gathering all that sticks there, then up to his mouth, wetting them with Hannibal's blood. The mix, he smears on the tree at face level, smiling when they are given another smattering of old rain from the tree. The water drips on his injured wrist, clotting the blood, soothing the shallow ache of Will's bite. Hannibal blinks, eyes widening, as a soft sigh of wind pushes against them. It sounds gentle, somehow feminine, and Will tilts his head.

"Do you hear her?" he murmurs.

"Yes," Hannibal breathes. "I think so."

"We must let her rest," Will says, and pushes himself upright, forcing Hannibal to move so that they can stand under their own strength. Still, he turns, and reaches, lacing their dirty fingers together. "Tomorrow, though…" He nods, pressing his lips together. "Tomorrow we may catch something."

"Buying her silence?" Hannibal says, teasing, but believing it all the same.

Will laughs, and tugs on his hand. "Come, Hannibal, we must go."

Hannibal nods, and lets Will lead him from the forest, down the little slope that marks the base of the mountain, to where they left their horses. Will's stallion, and Hannibal's mare, and she lifts her head and whinnies at him in greeting, drawing the stallion's attention. Will doesn't tie his animal, just as he doesn't chain up his dog, letting them roam freely at their leisure, confident that they will appear as needed.

Hannibal's mare is only in her bridle, her stomach fat with her second foal – Will's stallion is a persistent creature, and mounts her every season. In that, Hannibal likes to joke to himself, they are perfectly matched. He is careful as he climbs onto her back, sitting far forward and using only his voice and reins to urge her on, mindful of the foal. She will give birth, soon, he is sure.

They ride together back to the village, which has grown in both size and fortitude. It seems Will's reputation was not just isolated to his father's tribe, for trickling members of other similarly ruined settlements have come to them to make their home at the base of the mountain with the bringer of rains and the man who cured the famine. They are not unlike Romans, for how they look at Will, but so far they have all been pleasant and lively people, equally suited to the life of Bill's tribe as they make themselves at home.

In the field where they keep the horses, a black yearling grazes – the stallion's son, a tall colt that is all the color of night except for a splash of grey on his face from his mother. They dismount and relieve the horses of their tack, allowing the family to greet each other, and Hannibal smiles when he hears, from behind them, the sweet cry of a child.

At two years old, Eoin is a bright, happy boy, and runs both his mothers ragged with his boundless energy. He is not quite vocal, though, choosing instead to babble along with their nighttime songs or simply run around shrieking. Bua is most often seen, when he is in the village, playing with the boy.

Eoin runs up to them, Alana close behind, and Hannibal turns, crouches, and swings him up into his arms. Will smiles, but keeps his distance – he has yet to hold or touch Eoin, for a reason he has never said, but seems in keeping with the village traditions, for no one else finds it strange.

Alana smiles at them, and allows Will to embrace her with an arm around her shoulder, kissing her hair. "Not a good hunt?" she asks.

Hannibal shakes his head, grinning as Eoin tugs on his hair, kicking until he's let down, and then scampers to his mother's feet, flopping down in the wet grass and pulling on strands. She drops a hand, idly, to pet his head. He looks, thankfully, just like her, with a thin covering of straight dark hair, and icy eyes the color of lake water. Hannibal has noticed he smiles like his father, but that is no strong deterrent, for Margot smiles the same way. The Verger smile, he thinks, is too powerful to be denied its nature.

"Tomorrow," Will says, in that same assured way. Alana nods, accepting that easily. Her demeanor softens, when she looks at him, and grows sad. Will sighs. "How fares my father?"

"No change," she replies, and Will nods, pressing his lips together. A tremor runs through him, the first hint of sorrow, and he lowers his eyes. "He wants to see you."

Will nods again. It is not the first time she's mentioned it. At his silence, she sighs, and looks to Hannibal. Says, in Latin; "Talk some sense into him." And Will blinks, frowning at her, his mouth tugging down. She bends and picks up her son, hauling him into her arms, and turns away towards the village proper, where Hannibal sees Margot lingering at their door. They exchange nods, and smiles, and then Will huffs, and turns towards the field, his forearms resting on the high wooden fencing.

"Will," Hannibal murmurs, and mimics his posture, their elbows touching. "Why won't you go see him?"

Will sighs, and runs a hand through his hair, his eyes on the yearling as he begins to kick up a storm in play, chasing his father to the far edge of the field. "You'll think it childish," he murmurs.

"I won't," Hannibal promises. "Tell me."

Will swallows. "If I see him…it makes it real."

Hannibal sighs, and follows Will's gaze to the horses. There is, as well as those three, a third and forth animal, both geldings, that came with some of the other villagers when they joined the tribe. "I understand," he says, and feels Will's eyes on him. "For a long time after the loss of my family, I denied it to myself. But denial doesn't bring them back. Neither, too, does ignoring them."

Will shakes his head. "It's not just that," he says, and Hannibal turns, meeting his eyes. "If I were to see him, and see how…*pale* he must be, now. How near-death anyway…" He shakes his head again. "I would feel compelled to take the rest of it. To ease him into the next life. And I know enough about him to know he would ask me to do it. He'd be willing, to give me

whatever he had left. And I can't take it." He pauses, presses his lips together, and then his upper one curls back to show his teeth. "I won't take it."

"Forgive me for saying so, but you don't know that for certain," Hannibal murmurs. "Whether you help him or not, he is dying, Will. Time is the enemy of us all." And Bill is old, though up until a month ago he thrummed with the same life Hannibal sees in his son, in the earth, in the air. "Would you deny a father his final moments with his only son, to say his 'Goodbye's?"

Will is silent, but his eyes brim with tears; salt coats the air like the rush of the ocean. He shivers, heavy with sorrow, and wipes at his face.

"You're right, of course, I don't deny that you are right," he says quietly. He meets Hannibal's eyes from the corner of his own, and they are dark, now, robbed of gold, the light of the ocean swallowed in their depths. "Will you come with me?"

"Of course, my love, I will follow you anywhere."

Will nods, sighs heavily again, and takes Hannibal's hand. He leads Hannibal in silence towards Bill's house, which is the largest despite the fact that he lives alone. Hannibal has been inside it a few times, and finds it unchanged save for a large bowl of smoking herbs by his bed, clouding the air and filling the space with the scent of rosemary and lavender.

Bill is in his bed, thickly covered with furs and pelts, and looks so sallow and weak compared to the last time he was able to stand on his own. Hannibal doesn't think it's a sickness, for Will would have said something, or Niamh, or one of the other women. No, Bill is simply old, and his time on this earth is almost over.

"Father," Will breathes, and Bill's eyes rove under his pale lids. He opens them, showing Hannibal those eyes that he passed to his son, and his lips twitch in a weak smile. As they approach, Hannibal gets the scent of fever, sees the shine of sweat on his skin.

No, not long now.

"Is that my boy?" Bill asks, and paws gracelessly at the air above his chest. "Will? Will, is that you?"

Will is trembling, soaked with sorrow, his eyes wet and spilling tears, as he lets Hannibal's hand go, and approaches. "I'm here, father," he says, and kneels at his father's side. He takes Bill's hand in both of his own, kissing his knuckles as the man's hand squeezes his, gently. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting so long."

Bill smiles. "It is a fraction of how long your mother has waited for me," he replies. Hannibal smiles, though it's sad, and Will chokes on a sound not unlike a sob and laugh combined. "I'll be with her soon. Is there anything you would like me to say?"

Will's shoulders roll, flexing beneath his clothes, and he shakes his head. "Just that I love her," he replies, as achingly soft as a man in worship. "As I love you, father. I wish you didn't have to leave us."

"It is the gods' will," Bill murmurs. He speaks with the same certainty Will does, and Hannibal knows they share that belief – they must, for to father a creature such as Will, as Will told him once, one must commune with the gods, and accept the offering of a child. Will's mother, whether she was a priestess or oracle or witch in her own right, would have known this, and Hannibal wishes he could have met her.

"Will," Bill murmurs, and pats their clasped hands with his free one. His eyes stare up blankly, not at Will but at a space above his head, and he is smiling. Perhaps he can see Will's mother, can see Shannon, standing with her arms open, ready to welcome him to their true, last home. "Will, you know what must be done."

"No," Will whispers harshly, shaking his head. "I won't -. I can't be the one that kills you, father. I beg you not to ask it of me."

"You must, my boy," Bill says. He is growing weaker now, whitening in Hannibal's eyes. So pale and sallow, Hannibal might see his veins and pulse if he looks closely. "My boy, Will, you are strong, now. You have the strength to do what you have to. I…" His words stop, abruptly, as his chest rattles with a cough. It is fierce enough to shake his whole body, and Hannibal grabs a cup, fills it with water from a nearby jug, and approaches the other side of his bed, tilting it in offering. Bill wets his lips with it, and sighs. "Is that Hannibal?"

"Yes," Hannibal says, and kneels down beside him.

Bill smiles. "Good," he says. "I know you'll take care of each other."

Hannibal swallows, and manages a sad smile. "I am fortunate to know you, Bill," he says. "And will be forever in your debt – and Shannon's. Please, give her my thanks."

"I will," Bill replies. He is so weak, now, Hannibal thinks it would take merely a hand on his chest to stall his lungs forever. Thinks it would be merciful, now.

"Will," Bill says, with renewed strength, and rolls his head and opens his eyes fully, locking with Will's teary gaze. He smiles, weakly, but no less fond and warm, and tucks his fingers in Will's hair at his nape, pulling him down so their foreheads rest together.

Says, very quietly; "I am willing, my boy. Take."

Will closes his eyes, grits his teeth, a tremor running down his spine. The clench of his lids makes water coat his lashes, and they drip down onto Bill's face. He lets his hands go, and cups his head, holding him still, and his expression goes very soft, almost lax.

"Rest, father," Will whispers, and, after another long moment of utter stillness, he lifts his head and kisses Bill's sweaty hair. Bill's chest rattles with another cough, and as Will pulls away from him, and lets him go, he closes his eyes, and breathes his last.

Even in death, he is smiling.

Will stands, his hands shaking, and he takes the bowl of burning herbs, takes the cup of water still in Hannibal's hand, and douses the herbs with water. They sizzle and smoke, and then the

heat dies, and Will sobs, setting the bowl down again.

Hannibal watches him, heavy with sorrow for seeing Will weep, knowing he can offer nothing but himself as a presence to soothe. He circles the bed, glad when Will turns and pushes his forehead to his shoulder, clinging to him as he cries. Hannibal embraces him tightly, his cheek against Will's wild hair, letting him mourn. The Hibernians do not hold funerals, but wakes, celebrating the deceased's life, but he can allow Will this moment to cry for the loss of his beloved father.

He remembers Will's funeral pyre, the songs they had sung for him, the heat of the flames. It feels like so long ago.

He pets through Will's hair, and kisses his cheek, sighing at the cling of salt to his lips. "Would you like a moment alone?" he offers.

Will shakes his head fiercely, and clings all the more tightly. "Don't leave me," he snarls, and Hannibal nods, crushing Will to his chest as Will shivers, shaking in his arms.

Will pulls back, after a time, wipes at his flushed face, and stares down at his father. "This is the first time I…" His fingers curl, and his upper lip lifts. "Still, it felt good. Taking his life. It shouldn't feel good. I don't want it to feel good, but I did. I do. I feel alive, and he's not, and I…"

Fresh tears fall, and he shakes his head vehemently, growls, glares at Hannibal's feet.

"Maybe I am a monster."

"No, Will, you're not," Hannibal says, and cups his face, making him meet Hannibal's gaze. "You loved your father dearly. You have eased his suffering, and reunited him with the love of his life. That is mercy – that is kindness, not the acts of a monster."

Will breathes out, heavily, his eyes dropping. He swallows, and cups Hannibal's hands, drawing them from his face, and kisses his knuckles.

He sighs. "I have to go to the water," he says, and Hannibal nods – whether Will seeks solace, or seeks the advice of his friends and gods, he goes to the water when he must speak to them. To the lake, or further, where the river begins in the mountain. "I want you to come with me, but I can't…bear the thought of leaving him here."

"I can see to everything," Hannibal assures him. "When you return, we will light a fire and feast in his honor. Do not fret, my love; I'll take care of it."

Will nods, and gives him a grateful smile. Tugs on his hands, until Hannibal kisses him softly. "I'll be back before nightfall," he promises, and Hannibal nods. Lets him go, and watches him duck out of the house. He knows Will is going to his horse, so that he will travel as swiftly as possible, and waits until he hears the thunderous hoofbeats of the animal leaving the village.

Niamh and Margot enter the house, and they gaze upon Hannibal and Bill with soft, sad eyes. "He lived well," Niamh says, and Hannibal nods. "Come, help me with the body."

"Where is Will?" Margot asks, as Niamh helps Hannibal wrap Bill up in his pelts, and lift him between them. He seems so light, like he is only air; the weight of his soul, gone from his flesh, leaving nothing but skin and bone behind.

"He said he had to go to the water," Hannibal replies.

Niamh nods. "Yes," she says, like this is to be expected. "The gods must tell him who will next lead the tribe."

Hannibal tilts his head, brows lifting. "Does Will not simply inherit his father's title?" he asks. "That is how the Romans do it."

Niamh smiles, and shakes her head. "We hold an election," she replies. "But that is if we do not have a priest, or someone who can commune with the gods. Will can, and he can ask them who should next lead us." She shrugs, huffing as she helps Hannibal negotiate Bill's body out of the house, Margot remaining behind to clean and cleanse the place. "If the people agree with the gods' decision, that person rules next."

"If they agree?" Hannibal repeats with a smile. "Has there ever been a situation where they didn't?"

Niamh grins. "No, but there's a first time for everything," she replies with a laugh. They take Bill's body to the middle of the open area where they hold their feasts and fires. Villagers have come out, their faces downturned in respect, as Hannibal and Niamh carry the body to the center, where they will build a fire around it, and they place him down. Hannibal has seen enough deaths, though they are few in this place, to know how things go. They will pay their respects and offer tokens and trinkets that they think Bill will enjoy in his next life, and then they will build a fire, and send him up to the gods, and sing, and dance.

They did not do such a thing with Will, because there was no body to burn, merely an empty pyre, but Hannibal appreciates the tradition. It seems…wholesome, almost. Gentle in a way he has never seen before making Hibernia his home.

Niamh leaves to help Margot, and without Will by his side, the cold seeps into Hannibal, and he shivers. He sees Alana with Eoin nearby, and smiles at them, standing over as she holds her son's hand and they look upon the body as the first few approach, kneeling down and murmuring soft prayers and whispers of thanks.

She presses her lips together, and looks up at him. "It seems so strange," she says. "I lived most of my life in the ludus, and saw so much death. To see a body, a man, treated kindly, and so well-loved…"

Hannibal nods. "A welcome change," he murmurs, and smiles when Eoin grows bored of watching, and tugs on his clothes. He bends down and picks him up, thinking even this child weighs more than Bill did at the end, and laughs when Eoin tugs at his hair.

"Where is Will?" Alana asks.

"He went to the water," Hannibal tells her. "To pray, I think. Or perhaps he wanted to be alone."

Alana nods again, and sighs. "Did he say when he'll return?"

"Before nightfall," Hannibal replies, eyeing the sky, which has already grown very dark, as if the heavens are similarly close to tears. Perhaps they will find Will, weeping and mourning, and touch him with gentle rains to ease his pain and soothe his aches.

He sees a shadow pass through the crowd, and watches as it forms into Bua's shape, the dog panting and blood around his jaws from what Hannibal assumes was once a rabbit. He pauses at Bill's door, gazes at the open space, and then lays down in front of it, setting his head on his forelegs. His eyes face out, towards the field of horses, and Hannibal knows that he, too, is keeping watch, and will alert them when Will returns.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> Small warning - Will asks Hannibal to cut him, and Hannibal does, so there's mild self-harm by proxy.

Night falls, and Will still has not returned to the village. Hannibal tries not to worry, his eyes on the road leading between the horses' paddock and the mountain, eager to see the swath of shadow that is Will's stallion, or the man himself, shining in the dawning moonlight, but he does not come.

They light the pyre around Bill's body, and begin to sing their songs. One man has a drum and keeps the rhythm with a thunderous chorus, the rest of the villagers raising their hands, swaying to and fro as Bill's body burns, peppered with herbs to cover up the scent of burning flesh, and his soul melts with the smoke as they send him to the afterlife.

There is laughter, and shared stories of the man, and heavy jugs of that bitter ale Hibernians drink passing around. Hannibal allows himself one drink of it for the sake of joining with the celebration of Bill's life, but hasn't quite managed to make himself like the taste of it. Alana takes it from him with a smile when his nose wrinkles, and she laughs, and drinks heartily, Eoin a small, sleepy lump by her feet as she sits next to Margot on a log near the fire.

Still, Will does not come, and as the night becomes entirely black, marred only by pinpricks of starlight, Hannibal cannot wait any longer. He clicks his tongue, summoning Bua, and parts from the villagers with a small nod, pulling his cloak tight around himself to shield his skin from the seeping cold.

He goes to the horses, and puts a saddle and bridle on one of the geldings, wanting his mare to rest since she has already spent most of the day with him. He mounts the animal – a tall bay horse with a very sweet temperament and braids in his mane – and turns him towards the forest.

He digs his heels in and rides towards the base of the mountain. There is no wind, but the trees rustle in greeting anyway, and seem to bow to one side as if telling him where to go. He leaves the horse tied to a tree loosely, so that he might be able to tug on it and bolt if a wolf or other predator comes for him, and walks with Bua towards the little rise that overlooks the lake, where he and Will have often sat to watch the night come in. Will's horse is nowhere in sight, but that doesn't worry Hannibal – he lets the animal wander, and he will return to his mate and his son when the time is right.

Bua leaves him too, after a time, and Hannibal is alone in the dark. He is not afraid, but supremely aware of Will's absence, and very worried for him. It is not like Will to be gone

from him for so long – since Will returned, and became one with the tribe, hardly an hour has passed where Hannibal has been unable to touch him, or at least see him. He worries for Will; he had been so distraught, so heavy with sorrow, and Hannibal doesn't think he would do anything to hurt himself, but he has never seen Will so sad before, and doesn't know how to comfort him except to simply be there.

He goes to the rise above the lake, and gasps, rushing forward when he sees, not Will, but his belongings piled on the small cliff. His cloak, and his knife, and the rest of his clothes, down to his boots and underwear. He drags his hand along the furs that make up the shoulders of Will's cloak, and frowns around him, seeing no tracks in the soft mud that would give him a clue as to Will's passing.

The trees rustle as though whispering to each other, and Hannibal tilts his head, closes his eyes. The very air seems to say '*Will, where is Will? Will, darling, where are you?*' in that somehow feminine way, like a mother calling for her child.

It makes him warm, to think Shannon and Bill might be watching them, might be helping Hannibal in his search.

He stands, as the water ripples below him, making the calm surface of the lake break out into soft waves, and the moonlight finds a single break there – dark hair, first, and then pale skin. Hannibal blinks, and sighs in relief when he sees Will crest the surface of the water, dragging in a heavy gasp to let his lungs take in air.

He kneels on the edge of the cliff, fingers curled around the edge. The drop is not far, and the lake is deep – it is not unsafe to jump straight in, and he realizes that is what Will did.

Will floats in place for a while, his arms moving slowly just beneath the surface to keep him above the water, and then he opens his eyes, and lifts his head. Their gazes meet, and he smiles in greeting.

Hannibal smiles back, for it's an expression he recognizes; Will is, at least, happy to be in the water. "My love," he calls. "I was worried for you."

Will blinks at him, and lifts his eyes, and laughs at the moon as if she has just told him a joke. "Nightfall already?" he murmurs, and rolls onto his back, his toes and kneecaps and chest sticking up out of the water. He shines beneath the moonlight, the lake a black cavernous mouth ready to swallow him whole, but he will not drown, he will not sink; he is at home in the water.

After another long moment, Hannibal shifts his weight and sits, his heels over the edge of the rise, content to let Will float and settle himself for as long as he desires. This has always been a peaceful place, and now that Will is found, the trees quiet their whispers and stop their shivering.

Will sighs, and rights himself, swimming to the edge of the lake. He climbs out, glistening with water, so utterly beautiful and strong after spending so long in the place that gives him life; with Hannibal, who feeds him and keeps him healthy. He shakes himself off like a dog and climbs the rise, falls to his knees and crawls into place at Hannibal's side.

He settles on his cloak, so that the dirt and grass doesn't stain his skin, and presses his cool cheek to Hannibal's. His hair is wet, dripping with chill water, and Hannibal shivers, but in Will's presence, he is finally warm again.

He cards a hand through Will's slick hair, turns his face and kisses his jaw lightly. "Niamh told me that it is your task to find the next leader of the tribe," he says, not wanting to remind Will of the tragic loss of his father, but unsure of what else to say; Will's magic is something he will always be enthralled and intrigued by.

Will nods, his eyes dark, mostly pupil. He nuzzles Hannibal's neck and curls up against him, knees bent and resting over one of Hannibal's thighs, his shoulder tucked into the space beneath his cloak, between arm and flank.

But then, a sudden melancholy sweeps over him, and he trembles, his eyes brightening with water; tears, yet unshed. "I tried to ask," he says. "I couldn't bring myself to. I couldn't bear to make it real again."

Hannibal nods, wrapping his arm around Will's shaking shoulders, and pets through the water clinging to his bare skin.

"I feel too full," Will whispers, confessing it like he is ashamed. "There was so much life in him, still. With you feeding me, with meat plentiful, I'm not hungry, and I don't – I haven't been for a long time. But hunger made me see things. I don't see anything here."

Hannibal frowns, not quite understanding.

Will bites his lower lip, closes his eyes, and breathes; "I think I have to leave."

"Leave?" Hannibal repeats, his chest tightening at the suggestion.

Will nods. "I love being here. This place is my home, and you are my home within it. But without hunger, without desperation, the gods have no need to answer me. Why should they help the perfectly content? They are my friends, but they do not answer me as if I'm someone in need. I must *need*."

Hannibal's hand tightens around his arm. He doesn't want to ask, afraid of the answer, yet he must; "Are you going to leave me behind, as well?"

Will lifts his head. With his hair so wet, it plasters to his face and neck, making him look sleek and wild, and he's flushed with gathering heat as his body adjusts to the relatively warm air, no longer immersed in the chill lake. "I couldn't survive that," he murmurs, with a vehement shake of his head, making his hair fly around his face. He touches Hannibal's chest with a shaking hand. "No, I must have you. If I have nothing else, I must have you."

"But you still want to leave."

"It's not a question of 'want'," Will snaps, and settles on his heels with a low snarl. "But…. When I went to Rome, when I was given that vision of myself on a ship, it was because I was starving. When I brought the rains, it was because Rome ached for them. When I killed, it

was out of hunger. Now, I am full, and happy, and the land is alive. The gods will not answer me, here."

"Must you ask them?" Hannibal says, for he doesn't, still, quite understand the tradition; "Take up your father's mantle, lead in his place. Tell the people the gods chose you; I doubt they would call you unfit."

Will looks at him, and his smile is sad. "But I am unfit," he replies. "We cannot have children."

"Does that matter? Niamh told me lineage doesn't factor into who leads the village next."

"I'm a monster," Will breathes. "Deny it if you'd like, it's true. I am a parasite, Hannibal, a creature that feeds and feeds until there is nothing left to take. Even now, sated as I am, I would take more from you. From the water, and the animals. And you are a foreigner; you cannot lead with me. Neither of us can."

"Alana, then," Hannibal argues. "She is of this land, and has a child. She and Margot can lead."

Will sighs. His hand drops from Hannibal's chest, and it feels like a rejection, bone-deep, cutting like steel. Hannibal reaches for him, takes his hand in both his own, and Will lifts his eyes.

"No," he whispers, and looks to the lake. To the moon, biting his lower lip. "No. Not them."

A tremor runs through him. "This winter will be harsh, Hannibal," he says. "When I was gone from you, when I was so hungry I could think of nothing else but getting here, I saw thick snow, and blood upon it. I didn't know what it meant. I still don't, in truth. But I am afraid."

"If you see bloodshed, we must stay," Hannibal says. "We must defend them – don't you want to protect your people?"

"Of course I do," Will snaps, and turns on him with a sharp gaze. "I will fight for them, fiercely, give my life if I must. But…" He looks away again. "I don't like being blind."

Hannibal swallows, and joins Will in looking out to the lake. It has calmed, without him there to move the surface, and appears like a mirror, reflecting the large, pale moon, and her starlight children. He kisses Will's knuckles, watches Will shiver, his lashes dropping.

"Tell me, then," Hannibal whispers, when Will looks at him again. "What is your design? You wish for us to disappear, for how long? Until you are hungry again?"

Will sighs.

"We have both been blind," he says. His fingers curl between Hannibal's, and Hannibal tightens his own in response. "But I need to know what to do. I need to see."

"I want to help you, Will, but I don't know how."

Will nods, and pulls his hand away. He moves back, petting beneath his cloak, before he finds the knife he had used to playfully threaten Hannibal's neck during their hunt that morning. He settles, and sighs again, unsheathing it and looking down at his bared forearms.

He lifts his gaze, meets Hannibal's eyes, his own dark with so little blue in the nighttime, and turns it, so the blade rests against his wrist, and he is holding the handle out.

Hannibal takes the blade, and shakes his head when Will holds his wrists out in offering.

Will smiles, and bows his head, lifting his hands. "It won't hurt," he promises.

"I don't like the idea of harming you, whether it hurts or not."

"You are my bonded," Will says. "Mine alone, as I am yours. You alone have the right to give and take from me. It must be you."

Hannibal shakes his head again, and Will sighs, his eyes lowering to the scar on the inside of his thigh, where Hannibal cut him with a guard's sword, the day he found out Mason's plan to marry him off to Margot. The day he was so red with rage that even hurting Will seemed like a possibility.

"Hannibal," Will breathes, and holds his wrists out again. "I am willing. Take."

Hannibal knows how to cut a man until he bleeds to death. He does not know how to cut to simply take a little.

Will seems to understand this, and wraps one hand around Hannibal's, guiding the other holding the blade, to his forearm. He slides closer, his eyes shining blackly, and kisses chaste and warm against Hannibal's cheek.

"Please," he murmurs, as desperate as he is when he asks for Hannibal to fill him. How strange it seems, that he is so eager to starve. "If you don't do this, I must deny you my body, and my touch, and my love – and I would die before I saw that day. Please, Hannibal. Take from me. Hollow me out."

Hannibal fights his hand free and cups Will's nape, kissing him brazen and warm. Will gasps, trembling, his body arching closer, thighs parting as Hannibal pushes a knee between them, making Will straddle one of his legs.

Hannibal takes Will's arm, his branded arm, and sets the knife at the top-most edge, closest to his elbow. If he is to harm Will, he knows in what way he'd prefer to do it. He will not argue further; he doesn't understand, but he is helpless to resist when he feels the warmth of Will's magic flood him, brushing along his shoulders like a cat. He wonders if Will is giving him more through the press of their skin, if he can.

He presses with the knife, cuts below the Verger brand on Will's arm. Blood wells up hotly around the blade, for it is sharp and savage, and Will makes no sound of pain, doesn’t stiffen or moan, but shivers as Hannibal angles the knife and borders the brand with blood, slicing through his tender, raised skin which has been softened by the water.

He slices shallowly, but the fact of the matter is that he is cutting through flesh, peeling the brand from Will's arm, and Will grits his teeth, pushes his forehead to Hannibal's shoulder, and clenches his fists as Hannibal cuts him free of the last mark made by Mason Verger's hand. The slip of skin is large as his palm, and beneath it pulses hot flesh and slick blood.

Will takes the piece and throws it into the water, and the lake bubbles and swallows it like a dog given a treat.

Hannibal sets the knife down and covers the wound with his palm, gathers Will's shirt and wraps it tight around to stem the bleeding. Will's eyes are glowing gold, now, shining behind his lashes, as he lifts his head and meets Hannibal's eyes.

Blood drips down Will's forearm, pools at his wrist and coats the lines and calluses in his palm. He rubs tenderly at the wound from above the wad of cloth as if encouraging it to heal, but no rain falls, no gift from the gods to help Will heal.

Will nuzzles him, kissing lightly over Hannibal's racing pulse, and sighs. "I would have given it to you," he says. "My blood, my flesh, but I fear it would just…"

He stops.

"Is that why you will not touch Eoin?"

Will blinks at him, frowns down at his injured arm. He is pale now, sweating finely from shock of such a wound, and kneads anxiously at his shirt, but keeps the pressure up.

"Children are precious," he says quietly. "And they are so open to influence. So weak. If I touched him before he gained his sense of self, I could corrupt him." Hannibal frowns. "That is how monsters are made, Hannibal. One taste of me and he would never be satisfied, he would always be hungry. An insatiable, carnivorous *thing*."

"That is not how you told me your kind is made."

"He wouldn't be one of my kind," Will replies. "But you remember when I was speaking of Alana – my touch, my power, it corrupts lesser men. I feared it had changed Mason, and made him hurt her." Hannibal nods – he remembers. He never got a chance to tell Will that it was not true, that Mason laid with her the night Will killed Cordell, not the night Mason grabbed Will's throat and threatened him at his party.

"You fear Eoin would turn into the same."

"He has his father's blood," Will spits, his eyes dark, upper lip curling and nose crinkling in a savage snarl. "I love the boy, and I love Alana, but blood is a powerful thing."

"Margot shares his blood. Yet you do not fear her."

"Because she is her own woman," Will replies, like it's as simple as that. Perhaps it is – there is still so much that Hannibal doesn't understand, when it comes to Will. "She was already formed, and strong, when she met me. One of the strongest women I know."

Hannibal cannot argue with that. He sighs, and cups Will's bloody elbow, feels his flesh warm and tender and slick with blood. "Will," he sighs, and Will leans in, nudges his nose beneath Hannibal's jaw and makes him raise his head. Hannibal sighs again, and kisses him gently. "If you are truly set in your course to leave, I will follow you, without question. But I ask you to be sure. You said yourself that you are blind – I know you'd regret leaving your people, and have them suffer in your absence."

Will lets out a quiet breath through his nose, his golden eyes shining in the darkness like lanterns – brighter, Hannibal thinks, than the moon and stars ever could. "I know you worry for me," Will says. "But I am sure."

Hannibal nods. "Then let it be so."

Will smiles at him, and cups Hannibal's face with his bloody hand, his shirt falling to their thighs as he kisses Hannibal passionately, eager enough to send that familiar flood of warmth through him. He shivers beneath Will, petting down his fluffy, curling hair, his shoulders, his smooth flanks.

"We won't be gone long," he promises, though when he speaks, it sounds as though he is speaking more for his own benefit than Hannibal's. His lashes go low, and he smiles, and kisses Hannibal again. "We will be back before the snow comes down from the mountain, before the roads are impassable. Before winter, yes, we will return."

Hannibal smiles, placated by Will's certainty. "Come," he says, and stands, pulling Will to his feet. He reaches down and grabs Will's cloak, throwing it around Will's shoulders as he shivers. "I will bind your wound, and we will rejoin the wake. You were sorely missed."

Will nods, his expression growing somewhat sad again – but his eyes are still bright, and he smiles at the moon. "I know he's happy, now," he sighs. "In the arms of my mother, and they are dancing together in fields always green." Hannibal smiles, and gathers the rest of his clothes, holding them since Will is injured and seems in no hurry to grab them himself.

They walk together, as Will pulls his cloak tight to himself, and hums. "Do you think it's impossible, for such a thing to happen?"

"I know nothing of the afterlife, nor which true gods preside over it," Hannibal replies with a small shrug. "I like to think it is so – that one day, you and I might share the same fate."

"Oh, we will," Will says with another assured nod. "We are bonded, forever – in this life and the ones that follow. Perhaps we might even return, and find each other again in a new life."

Hannibal blinks, his brows rising, and he looks at Will curiously.

Will smiles at him. "Imagine, sometime in the future, both of us born anew – it has happened before, I am sure of it. We found each other once, maybe when man was still very young, barely beginning to crawl. And we would again, when the castles have crumbled and Rome is no more than a memory. I think this is so. I know this is so."

"You believe there are many lives a man can live, and that we will find each other in each one?" Hannibal asks, disbelieving, but happy at the notion.

Will pulls to a halt, forcing Hannibal to stop beside him, and meets his gaze. He takes Hannibal's hands, wrapping through clothing and around warm skin, and tightens his grip. "Did you not feel it?" Will murmurs. He doesn't sound upset that Hannibal doesn't share his belief; he is smiling, still. "When I saw you, for the very first time, something in me leapt and settled. I thought to myself 'Oh, there you are'. Even dressed as a Roman, even in the service of an evil man, when I saw you, the ocean waved to me and the wind whispered, and they told me that, if you were willing, you were mine."

Hannibal remembers with sharp clarity, the day he and Will met for the first time. Remembers seeing his wildness, his fierceness, and thinks it a mighty coincidence indeed, that he was on the docks that day. That Mason chose that day to gather new warriors. That Will behaved in such a way to garner his attention.

"It must have been so," Hannibal murmurs, and lifts Will's hands to kiss his knuckles. He smiles, as Will does. "I think, if we were granted permission to return to this earth, I would find you again. I would try."

Will's smile is bright with joy, and he leans in close and kisses Hannibal's deeply.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal has bound the wounds of countless men – and for each, multitudes upon them, from the mild to the very severe. Before he was a slave, and a gladiator, he knew the terrors and trials of war; had seen men only half his age lose entire limbs to the swing of a sword; had seen men be crushed to death beneath their horses, decapitated with a single strike; seen them die slow, too quick to realize they were going to lose their lives.

All of it, bright and glimmering with red, red blood.

He did not let himself think of Will's death, when he thought Will was dead. Did not allow himself to imagine how it might have happened: if Mason had gutted him with a little knife, through the stomach, cleanly; if Jack had felled him with his whip around Will's neck and his sword stuck through Will's mouth. If Will had simply died from his wounds, crawling on his belly like a snake, bleeding slowly to death without his friends in the rain to heal him.

He hadn't let himself think about it, sure that it would have driven him to madness, to think and imagine and never know. Then, Will was not dead – alive again and brilliant and so beautiful Hannibal wept. He thinks of that night, the night of Eoin's birth, the night he had found Will in this very homestead, kissed and filled him while Will trembled.

He pauses, fluttering back to reality like wisps of cloud parting from sunlight, as Will tucks his curled fingers beneath Hannibal's chin and makes him lift his gaze. They had returned to the village and Will had taken the ale in hand, drank with his people, and led them in a song with lyrics told from the perspective of a boy, going off to war, and then warning his own son once he was grown that not all enemies were what he thought of them. It had been a strangely poignant piece, soft, Will's voice almost angry by the end. Hannibal wonders if Will's father begged him to stay, even when they were all starving. Wonders how long after Will left that the land became rich with food again.

Now, though, they are in Hannibal and Will's shared house, perched atop the pile of furs and blankets they call a bed, cross-legged and facing each other while Hannibal carefully applies a layer of salve to Will's injured forearm, wrapping it gentle but firm with a strip of cloth.

He ties the knot with a final tug, and that is the arm Will uses, the hand he uses, to make Hannibal meet his gaze.

Will's eyes are dark, his brows drawn together to form a crease in the middle, his head tilted. "You are troubled," he murmurs.

Hannibal smiles, and takes Will's wrist, kissing his knuckles tenderly. "You have given me a lot to think about."

"Oh?"

Hannibal nods, and sighs, suddenly feeling so very tired. Will's magic, when it comes, floods him with warmth and energy, but that means that when it ebbs he feels as though he has run for miles. Normally being in Will's presence is a steady, pulsing stream of energy that comes to him, and he knows he feeds it back to Will in some way, whether it's through touch or kisses or more carnal things, but Will is trying to starve himself – as a result, he is giving too much, and taking none back, so there is no alternative for Hannibal except to let it go and deal with the aftermath.

He lies down on his side, tugging Will to him, lazily pushing at Will's cloak, which is the only thing clinging to his body to cover himself, and bares smooth, tanned skin, marred with scars so old they appear as white lines. He smiles, pleased at the sight of it, and rubs his hand idly down Will's hip, his thigh, back up to trace the edges of his ribs when he breathes in.

Will bears his touch eagerly, lashes low and head bowed to rest his hair against Hannibal's mouth, shifting close so Hannibal can feel the warmth of him emanating, soaking into him.

"I sense…" Will raises his eyes, meets Hannibal's gaze, and Hannibal sighs through his nose. "I trust you, of course, with everything that I am – my life, and my love. But I sense there is some second part to this design of yours you're not telling me about." Will's eyes flash, his lips twitch in a smile almost proud before he schools his expression, tilting his head. "Whether you think I don't care, or you think it's not important, or you're trying to spare my feelings, I could not say. But it's not the first time you've done such a thing, and I can't help feeling the same way I did, then."

"Angry?" Will asks, frowning.

"No, my love, not angry. Anxious, perhaps you'd call it." Hannibal smiles. "I don't like not knowing what you're thinking."

At that, Will smiles wide and toothy. "You would make my head glass," he says with a laugh, touching Hannibal's chest. "Is there a material, I wonder, that only you could see through – if that were the case, I would wear only that, and be bare for you always."

"So you admit you're hiding something," Hannibal says.

Will laughs again, so beautiful, so alive with joy. "Perhaps," he purrs, and arches against Hannibal's body, shivering when Hannibal's hand slides to his back, cradles in the natural dip of his spine and pulls him in until their bellies and thighs rut together. "Would you like to venture a guess?"

Hannibal's brows rise, when Will grins at him. There is something boyish and mischievous about the light in his eyes. Will pushes himself upright, turns so he's propped on his injured arm – it does not shake, does not quiver with weakness – and leans down to nudge their foreheads together.

"Your first clue," he says, and pets Hannibal's cheek, before he stands. "Come with me."

Hannibal blinks in surprise, watching as Will pulls on a pair of leggings and a long blue tunic, and his boots. He holds his hand out for Hannibal, who takes it and allows Will to pull

him to his feet. Will kisses him, chaste and quick, and leads him back to the wake, which is still going strong.

Will leads him Niamh, who is sitting with Alana and Margot. Eoin is asleep, cradled in his mother's arms, the women in deep and intimate conversation, but they part and smile up at Will and Hannibal as they approach, and Margot shifts on the log to make room.

Hannibal sits, and Will crouches on the ground, one hand steadying him on Hannibal's thigh. "Have the gods told you who is to lead us next?" Niamh asks.

Will shakes his head. "They told me I must go to my mother's shrine," he tells her. Hannibal blinks at him in surprise. "The one where we used to live."

Niamh frowns. "That is almost a week's ride away," she says, soft with worry.

Will nods. A week there, and back – and Hannibal remembers Will telling him the longest he went without food was five days. How could he possibly survive that long?

"Hannibal and I will go," Will says. "And return with our answer. We will leave in the morning."

Niamh sighs. "Then we must decide who will lead us until you return."

Will nods again, and pushes himself to his feet.

"Do you have any ideas?" Alana asks.

Niamh raises a shoulder. "We can talk about it in the morning," she says with a kind smile. No one mentions the bandage around Will's arm, nor his comparative lack of clothing, though Hannibal sees Alana eyeing Will's arm in concern. Hannibal did a good job of cleaning and binding it, however, and though there is a small patch of clotting blood staining the bandage, it is not leaking.

"We will be back before the snowfall," Will promises her. "But this will not be the first winter you have had here; you know the movements of the animals, and there is plenty in the stores. Winter will strike harshly, if what I have seen in the past is true – you must be ready, but I am not worried for food."

Margot huffs, but she is smiling. She stands, and touches Will's shoulder. "Come, I want to show you something," she says, now as fluent in the Hibernian tongue as the rest of them. Will nods, and they follow her to a small set of cages, wherein there are pigeons and crows. Margot taps on the topmost one, and the bird inside flutters and caws, fixing them with a beady, intelligent eye. "When you go, take one of the birds, and when you are returning, send it to us, so we will know to expect you."

She looks at them with a fond, knowing smile. "But take your time."

Hannibal tilts his head.

Margot shrugs, and offers no further explanation.

Will's fingers lace with his, and he uses his other hand to cup Margot's cheek, and gives her a warm one-armed embrace, before they part with another smile. Then, Will's eyes flash, and he looks over his shoulder, towards Alana.

He licks his lips, and murmurs; "We will take a bird." And says nothing more. Hannibal would give the world to know what Will is seeing.

Margot nods, and returns to Alana, Eoin, and Niamh. They begin a more animated discussion, and Niamh gestures for one of the men from a neighboring village who joined theirs to come over and sit with them, joining the talk.

Will smiles, satisfied, and gestures for Hannibal to walk with him, back towards their house. They pass another series of couples, all entwined in various stages of intimacy, and Hannibal blows out a breath through his nose – he cannot help compare them to the parties Mason Verger threw, and thinks it a much more pleasant atmosphere, knowing every couple in this village is made of a pair who genuinely desire each other, and that their interactions are not done with masks and gold, but sweat and mutual pleasure.

"Do your people often lay together during a funeral?" he asks, once the door to their home is closed and Will sheds his clothes, dropping them to the floor.

Will hums. "Sometimes, when confronted with death, a man or woman desires more than anything to prove that they are alive." He throws a wide grin over his shoulder, towards Hannibal, and plops himself down on their bed.

"And what thing gives life most of all?"

Hannibal smiles, for he cannot deny that. He sheds his cloak and boots, his belt, and his shirt, dropping them in a pile by Will and climbing into bed beside him. He cups Will face, kissing him deeply, and presses him down onto their bed.

Will embraces him, strong arms looped around Hannibal's shoulders, nails in his back, and sighs. "Do you want to prove you're alive, Will?" Hannibal asks, as Will spreads his legs – a move as instinctive and natural as it might be made from desire. Will is trained, now, to part his thighs when Hannibal comes to him.

Will shakes his head, but rolls onto his stomach, his back and neck an open invitation for Hannibal's mouth that he eagerly accepts, letting his body press flat to Will's as he nuzzles at his lover's wild hair. "No," he murmurs. "I know I'm alive. I can smell it, here, and feel it on you. That's enough for me."

Hannibal hums, and nips gently at Will's neck, making him shiver. "And," he finishes, "you insist on going hungry."

Will nods, eyes closing as he rests his cheek to their bed, spreads his fingers through the thick furs, hands splayed out wide by his head. "I won't deny you, if you want it," he says, shivering as Hannibal kisses his warm cheek. "I'm always willing, for you."

"Your designs and your words now contradict each other," Hannibal murmurs.

Will's lips twitch in a smile. "I'm selfish," he replies, and tilts his head further, kissing lightly at Hannibal's cheek. Hannibal smiles, and runs his hands up Will's flanks, lacing their fingers together. Will hums, and nudges his nose to Hannibal's jaw. "Well? I gave you a clue. Can you guess?"

Hannibal lets out a soft, considering hum, pressing his face to Will's hair and breathing in deeply. "What will you gain, by visiting your mother's shrine? Is that where you truly intend to go?"

"Of course," Will replies with a laugh. "Why would I lie?"

"Why indeed?" Hannibal says, and smiles against Will's warm skin. He thinks; "They will have someone lead in your stead, until you return with the name of a successor." Will nods, makes a quiet sound of encouragement, and Hannibal's smile widens; "I wonder, what if you were to never return? Or what if you go, and still receive no answer?"

"Yes, I wonder, what would happen?" Will asks lightly.

Hannibal lifts his head, and smiles when Will looks up at him with that same mischievous grin. "You knew Niamh would step up," he says, and Will arches against him, purring softly. "You know your people are not the kind to sit idle – they are survivors, of famine and war and plague. They will not simply wait for you, or the gods."

"I learned much in Rome," Will says with a nod. "They relied so much upon the gods, wailing and praying and cursing them in equal measure. A man might be a god's best friend, and still not speak with them as you and I speak to each other – as we speak to our friends, to Alana and Margot and all the others. Why should we wait for someone who will not answer us, for whatever reason?"

"Do you intend to simply disappear?" Hannibal wonders aloud. "If we take too long, by the time we return there may already be a leader in place – all you have to do is agree upon his or her name."

Will grins at him.

Hannibal laughs. "You are a terribly clever thing, aren't you?"

"And you the same!" Will says, laughing with him. He turns to his shoulder, tilts his head to let Hannibal kiss his neck, a shiver running down his spine, his lashes going low. "Did you not say you would follow me anywhere? What if I simply wish to go, and keep going, until I am tired and ready to come home?"

"What you're suggesting is not unlike a honeymoon," Hannibal murmurs, thinking of Margot's words.

Will blinks at him, frowning, for Hannibal used the Latin word for 'honeymoon', not knowing the word in the Hibernian tongue. "What is that word?"

"When a man and woman – or two women, or two men in your laws – marry each other, or choose to mate for life, it is customary in some places for them both to escape together, to a place where they won't be troubled by their friends and family, and can enjoy each other's presence alone."

"Oh," Will says. "'Mhí na meala'. That is the phrase."

Hannibal nods, and repeats it.

Will grins at him, bright and happy. "Are we married, Hannibal?" he purrs, lashes going low, as he lifts his head to nuzzle Hannibal, their noses brushing. Hannibal merely shrugs in answer – in truth, it seems too plain a word for what they are, but he can think of no other that they haven't already said. What word could possibly encompass all that Will is to him – bonded, not just through blood and sex and the strange contract of his nature, but spanning throughout time and multiple lives, as Will has claimed?

Will sighs, smiling widely. "I like the idea," he murmurs, and Hannibal lets him go when Will fights his hands free, rolling onto his back, a small shift and negotiation of their bodies meaning Hannibal is, once again, settled between his strong thighs. "Of course, we both know that you are mine, and I am yours, but being only together, on a 'honeymoon', that is…"

He hums, and nods gently, brushing his hands up Hannibal's shoulders, into his hair. "I'm glad you think so," Hannibal murmurs, pressing a soft kiss to Will's open mouth.

Will smiles, and then his head tilts, a small crease forming between his brows again. "But we can't, can we?" he says, and sounds – not quite sad, but aggravated, like the thought is a buzzing fly at his ear. "You are married to Margot."

Hannibal blinks, lifting his head. In truth, he has rarely thought of that day, but yes, he must admit that's true – he and Margot and still legally bound together under Roman law. Which means the Roman gods see it – something that never mattered to him, but might matter to Will and his friends.

"Perhaps we can undo it," he offers.

Will huffs a rough, amused noise. "Shall we go to Rome, and march up to the Emperor himself, and demand he untie you from Margot's hand?" He rolls his eyes and grins. "I thought you were a clever man."

"Are there none in your country, that could ask the gods to remove our union?" Hannibal asks. "I have never laid with Margot as her husband, or in any other way – we have no children, no affection for each other beyond friendship. There is nothing to make our marriage worth keeping a hold of."

Will hums. "Perhaps you are right," he replies. He brightens, suddenly, again, and cups Hannibal's face. "We can ask my mother, when we visit her! I'm sure she'd be willing to give her advice."

Hannibal's head tilts.

"The solstice is coming soon – the height of winter. The veil between the living and the dead is thin at that time. I will be able to speak with her, especially if I am hungry, and ask for her advice and her wisdom." Will shivers, blinking slowly, and swallows. "Perhaps I will see my father there, too."

Hannibal sighs, and kisses Will's cheek, petting his hair from his face. He smiles, for he knows Will might hit him for saying it;

"Your will, my hands."

Will barks a laugh, and indeed, his closed fist comes down on Hannibal's flank in a playful swat. "One day I might cure you of all of Rome's habits," he says with a grin, which Hannibal returns, and kisses away, rolling their bodies together as Will shivers and sighs, hands flat now on Hannibal's back.

Hannibal lets out a soft, ragged sound, incensed by the sweet, warm press of Will beneath him. He cups Will's face, tilts his head and kisses him deeply. Will moans, parting his lips, licking into Hannibal's mouth as he shivers and arches up against Hannibal's chest.

"Oh, Hannibal," he breathes, when they part for air, his eyes wide and shining gold like treasure buried deep in water. His fingers curl around the back of Hannibal's neck and he gives a sweet, desperate sound, trapped behind his teeth. Hannibal can feel the heat of him turn from a soft cover to a thick, insistent thrum, like Will is pushing his power into Hannibal, compelling him to act. Hannibal growls, and noses at his neck.

"I know you intend to starve, my love," he breathes, but doesn't fight the urge to cup one of Will's thighs, lifting his leg, his other hand wrapped in Will's hair. Will trembles beneath him, whining softly. "Don't tempt me to break you from your course."

Will moans weakly, pawing at his hair, his shoulders, raking nails down his back. His bandage is the only break from his warm, sweaty skin, and the knot of it brushes down Hannibal's arm, making him growl. He forces himself to stop, before he becomes too driven, to remove the rest of his clothes and pierce Will, and fill him – he doesn't have the self-control to deny them this if he gets too far.

He pulls away, forces Will to roll to his side, Hannibal facing him, shoulder to the bed. Will trembles finely, eyes shining and gold, but contents himself with merely curling their fingers together, kissing Hannibal's wrist, over the scarring bites he so-often leaves.

Will shivers, pressing close to Hannibal as Hannibal pulls one of the furs over their bodies, and tucks his nose to Hannibal's neck, wrapping himself up tight against Hannibal's body. It's natural to put a hand on Will's heaving side, to let his other arm be used as a pillow, stretched out behind Will when Will settles his cheek on Hannibal's bicep.

He bites his lower lip, lifts his eyes, and asks, plaintive and sweet; "Kiss me?"

Hannibal smiles, and leans in to do just that, though he keeps it as chaste and soft as he can. Still, Will must be hungry – he hasn't eaten since…well, since that morning, and Hannibal

took blood from him since. Will's appetite is vast and hardly satiable even in a land so vibrant, with Hannibal so eager to feed him all the time.

Above them, outside, a whispering promise of thunder rolls in.

They pack bedding, rations, clothes, and enough water to last them until the next major river out West, and load their belongings onto the two geldings. The stallion, Will says, will be compelled to return to his mate and son if they take him away for too long, and he should be there when Hannibal's mare gives birth.

He says it with the same certainty he says all things, and Hannibal has no desire or inclination to deny it.

One of Margot's crows joins them, the bird perched in a little cage on top of Hannibal's saddlebags. She also gives them a long strip of twine, to tie around the bird's foot and let him fly while they are not riding. Hannibal isn't sure riding with a bird on the saddle is going to be good for either the crow or his horse's nerves, but Margot assures him that her birds are very comfortable around the horses, and if they keep the pace slow, he'll be fine.

Will embraces Alana and Margot, careful not to touch Eoin, and then climbs on his horse as Hannibal gives each woman a fond hug and a kiss on their cheeks, and bends down to ruffle Eoin's hair. The boy grins at him, widely.

Hannibal brings his sword, and ties it through the neck strap connecting both front parts of his saddle, around the front of his horse's chest, and mounts him with a huff, gathering his reins. He is riding the same sweet-natured horse he rode to find Will, and Will's horse is so grey it is almost white.

"May the road rise up to meet you, and the wind be always at your back!" Alana calls, waving to them as they turn to the road and walk from the village. Will grins, and Hannibal is warm with affection at the Hibernian blessing.

Behind them, the smoke from the pyre still rises, like a beacon. For Hannibal is signifies not death, but rising life anew – Bill is with Shannon now, he truly believes that, for there could be no other fate for a man like him. The man who took in Hannibal and his friends, who housed and fed and protected him, who so-wisely told him that sometimes there is only one love in a man's life, and Hannibal is free to cling to that love for as long as he desires.

That same man raised Will – beautiful, brilliant, enchanting Will, and Hannibal will forever be in his debt for that.

Will catches his eye, finds Hannibal staring at him, and gives him an off-kilter, curious grin. "What are you thinking about?" he asks.

"You," Hannibal replies simply, for it is that simple.

Still, Will's cheeks color; a soft pink to match the lingering color of dawn as it turns to day. "Good things, I hope," he says with a teasing smile.

"Impossible, I should think, to be otherwise."

Will laughs, loud enough to make his horse perk up, ears back to listen. "Your words are always so sweet," he says warmly. "They say that is the way to trap animals – offer them honey."

"You're not an animal, Will," Hannibal murmurs. Will hums, pressing his lips together. His eyes lift, narrowing to the lingering sparks of stars that have not quite been swallowed by the sun. He looks to the mountain, which rises to their right, and clicks his tongue, urging his horse up the hill that Hannibal, Alana, Margot and the rest crested what feels like a lifetime ago. Three years, it has been three years since he went this way for anything other than a quest for food. Even forays to neighboring towns for trade are not done by him nowadays.

It feels strange, to be riding away from this place he has called home for so long, knowing he will not see it for some time. The air is rich and buzzing with the aftereffect of the rains last night, the ground soft and squelching underfoot with mud, the grass glistening with morning dew.

He sighs. "Your land really is beautiful, Will," he murmurs. Will smiles at him. "It is strange, to me, for it's as wet and green as I remember my own homeland being. Yet when I think of places from my childhood, they are starting more and more to resemble the forests, the mountains, the scent and feel of this place. Blurring together, until I cannot tell what is memory and what is fancy – what remains from my old life, and what exists in my life after you."

Will tilts his head. "Would you like to go there, one day?" he asks, neither guile nor displeasure in his voice.

Hannibal considers that. "I don't think so," he admits. "There is nothing but loss, and pain, there."

Will frowns. "One could say that about any place," he replies with a shrug. "This land is where my mother died. My father, too – where I might, one day, lay down and never rise again. And you. The land where you lingered and thought me dead for a year. But it is also my home, Eoin's home, the place where Alana and I came from. Every place has pain, and goodness in it."

"Even Rome?" Hannibal challenges, with a playful smile.

Will rolls his eyes. "Rome is where I met the friends I have now," he says. He smiles. "It is where I met you. For that alone, it might be my favorite place on earth."

"Now I know you're teasing me," Hannibal says with mock horror. Will laughs, and nudges his toe against Hannibal's leg.

"Come," Will says, and corrects his horse on the little, winding path again. "Niamh was right – it is many days between home and the shrine. Winter will be here soon, and I would like to return before the snows make it impossible."

Hannibal nods, and clicks his tongue, urging his own horse to follow alongside, a half-step behind Will's.

Chapter End Notes

these boys are so soft im cry

Chapter 4

They ride without stopping for the whole day, and make camp under the shelter of a small cluster of trees that jut up from a grassy field. The ground has dried somewhat, and under the protection of the boughs it is relatively sturdy and solid, and they pitch an angled sheet to protect them from the wind. Will says it will not rain, and Hannibal believes him.

They hobble the horses so they cannot bolt, but allow them to graze freely, and light a small fire. Will doesn't eat cooked meat, so Hannibal merely roasts his own as Will chews absently on a slip of fresh rabbit meat, his eyes dark and fixed on the vast expanse of sky as it darkens and turns black, broken only by stars and the light of the moon.

Hannibal eats, until his belly is sated, and sighs when Will finishes his own small morsel – he only eats a little, so he does not go mad with hunger before they reach the shrine, but Hannibal has lived with him long enough to know that the paltry offering will not satisfy him for long, or much at all. Will's eyes have a ring of gold in them that shines in the firelight.

Will tilts his head when the breeze whispers to him, smiles as though it is telling him a joke, and says, "Will you tell me about your family? You know all of mine, and I so little of yours."

Hannibal presses his lips together. The aches of his loss are so old they feel as though they belong to another man, another life – perhaps he did die, in the East, and was resurrected in Rome for the sole purpose of finding Will.

"I was older than my sister by six years," he tells Will. "Her name was Mischa. She had hair the color of wheat, and silver, and dark trees, all mixed together like mine is, and blue eyes."

Will smiles. "Like mine?"

Hannibal shakes his head. "More like…more like Mason's, truth be told. Sharper. She was very intelligent, and a very happy child. Fearless, to the last." He shivers, remembering how she had gazed at him on their last day together, how she had clung to him and said 'Brother, go, I will be fine'. That was the day Hannibal was taken to the war. It would be a year before Hannibal received word that his whole family and town had been butchered by the Romans.

Will tilts his head. "Did she look like your mother?"

Hannibal considers the question. In truth, it is difficult to remember precisely what his mother looked like, but he knows she had a stern face, and sharp features. "In the eyes, I think," he replies. "I don't remember."

Will nods. "Everyone says I looked like my mother," he says, and Hannibal raises a brow, because he has met Bill, and thinks he and Will shared a stark likeness, though most of Bill's face was always hidden by his dark hair. Will smiles at him, as though sensing his thoughts. "When you meet her, you will understand. I think they simply meant I behaved like her."

"Because of what you are?"

"Perhaps," Will replies with a one-shouldered shrug. He pets down his thighs, shivering as the flames begin to die – the fire was not built to last, simply to cook food for them and light the dusk, and they let it die down, instead using each other to stay warm. "I had her laugh."

Hannibal believes that. "How old were you when your mother died?"

"Old enough to remember her, and honor her," Will says. His eyes turn dark, the gold swallowed by echoes of old memories, and he presses his lips together, dipping his chin. "I didn't cry when she died. Sometimes I regret that I didn't, but I felt like I could still feel her. She would call to me on the wind, and send messages to me through the forest and the rains. I know she is waiting for us at her shrine, and will be happy to see me."

Hannibal wraps an arm around Will's shoulders, holding him close beneath Hannibal's thick cloak as another shiver runs through Will. They have embraced like this often, on the little rise above Will's lake, staring at fish and stars in equal measure.

Will sighs, and rests his cheek on Hannibal's shoulder, his lashes going low. "Hannibal," he murmurs, and sounds strangely nervous when he speaks the name. Hannibal, in answer, merely brushes his thumb over the rise of Will's strong bicep. "I had another dream. It was not a vision, it lacked the feeling of one, but that thing I told you about, the blood in the snow, it came to me again. I am worried, though I know the village is strong and capable. I can't help feeling something terrible is about to happen."

Hannibal presses his lips together, and kisses Will's hair. "There is something I used to do, when I was first brought to Rome," he says. Will lifts his head so their eyes can meet, blinks at him, staring openly. "I used to think to myself, 'If this thing I am afraid of were to happen, what would it affect?'. For instance, if I died in the arena, would it matter? If I rose up and killed Mason, who would suffer, and what would I do after? More often than not, even if the answer wasn't a pleasant one, it would calm me."

Will's brow creases, but he doesn't look confused.

"So what would happen, if someone were to attack our home while we were away?"

"They might all die," Will replies.

Hannibal nods. "What do you think it would take, for them all to die?" he asks. "Your people are strong, Will, and smart. They know the land, they know its secrets, they know how to survive through famine and plague. They can fight."

Will sighs through his nose – a short, accepting noise.

"If we were there, do you think we could turn the tides?"

"I don't know," Will says with another aggravated huff. "And as I said, I would die for them, to protect them, if I could. As I know you would as well. But the point is we will not know until we return."

Hannibal smiles. "Ah," he murmurs, and nuzzles Will's hair. "I didn't know you could see the future so readily. Is nothing unknown to you?"

"Don't tease me; you know that's not how it works."

"I cannot calm your fear for you, Will – fear is an instinct purely from the heart, and the only way I could take it from you is to rip your heart from your chest." Will shivers, bites his lower lip, and presses close to Hannibal's flank. "But I have seen so much with you, and I trust in your plans and your power. If trouble is coming, I know in my heart you will see it."

Will sighs again.

"What happened to Francis and Randall?" he asks. Hannibal blinks – he has never asked after them before, simply accepted their absence in that same easy way he accepts all things. "They are good fighters too – I would rest easier, knowing they were there."

"They left soon after we all settled here," Hannibal replies. "I don't know where they went."

Will nods, absently. "Perhaps it would be good for us to find them again," he suggests. "If they are somewhere where people talk, and journey through for trade, they may hear whispers."

"My love, as much as I would be overjoyed at the idea of seeing them again and knowing they are well, it has been years – they might not even be in Hibernia anymore. They may have done what I could not, and gone home."

Will smiles. "My mother will know," he says with a nod. "We will ask her."

Hannibal laughs. "Were you always so dogged with your questions?"

"Where do you think I got it from?" Will asks with a teasing grin. Hannibal rolls his eyes, and Will stands, and pours some of his waterskin over the fire, dousing it with a faint hiss. Smoke rises up like a miniature version of a funeral pyre, and Will shivers. Hannibal stands, drawing him close, and together they crawl beneath the angled sheet, onto their thin pallet of bedding and furs.

Will curls up against him, letting out a sweet, ragged sound when Hannibal embraces him tightly. "Are you hungry, my love?" Hannibal asks, but he knows the answer. Still, Will nods, mouthing warmly at his neck, but resists the urge to bite, and to drink. His tongue finds the old scar from the night of their reunion, and Hannibal shivers when he licks over it.

"I haven't gone without food for so long," Will confesses, soft and child-like. "Perhaps it is the reason I am so afraid. The last time I was this hungry, I didn't know if I would ever find you again. So much was unknown to me besides pain and hunger, I hated that feeling."

Hannibal nods. "The second your questions are satisfied, I will do everything in my power to fill you again," he promises, and Will shivers, arching close to him, legs spreading so that they can entwine with each other. Hannibal puts a hand in his hair and kisses his forehead as

Will draws their cloaks over each other for another layer of warmth. "I'm here, Will, and I will never leave your side. You won't have to fear hunger again."

Will sighs.

"I know," he murmurs. Hungry as he is, he tires quickly, already slurring with sleep.

Hannibal closes his eyes, embracing Will as tightly as he can, so Will can hear his steady heartbeat and, hopefully, find solace in it.

"Will," he murmurs, and Will gives a sleepy hum in answer, "if something *were* to happen to me, what would you do?"

Will goes still, and pulls back. The light is low, but Hannibal can see his pale face, see the outraged shine in his eyes. He bares his teeth. "Don't think of things like that," he demands, and claws at Hannibal's flank. "You are mine, and I am yours."

"I don't want you to starve, darling," Hannibal murmurs.

"I will live off the land, if I must, until time takes me as well. I will seek out no other. *Never*." Though he does not say it, Hannibal thinks he can read the intention clear as day in Will's eyes, hear it in his voice; if Hannibal were to leave this earth and this life, Will would not linger for long after. Out of choice.

Hannibal sighs. "You're right," he says. "I shouldn't think about things like that."

"Pretend it is your game," Will tells him. "But do not dishonor me by thinking I'm not like you – when you thought me dead, did you seek the embrace of another man, or a woman? Did you share their heat during the night, and betray my memory?"

"Of course not."

"Then I would not betray yours," Will says with a sharp nod. "It's true – for me, sex is a way to feed, a way to live. But I don't need it. I didn't have it before you, and after you, I will never eat that way again."

Hannibal blinks at him, frozen. "You…never?" he asks weakly. Of course, Will implied as much, the first night they lay together – 'I'm always hungry but I'm not always willing'. And Will had shown a certain innocence, a lack of knowledge of how two men could bond that way, but Hannibal never took it to mean that Will had *never* done something like that.

Will smiles, his pale cheeks coloring with pink, and dips his gaze. "Is that so strange?" he murmurs.

"Not strange," Hannibal says immediately, petting through his hair, "just surprising. You are beautiful; I find it impossible to think no one looked at you the way I do, before we met."

Will shrugs, a motion that moves his entire body in a gentle roll against Hannibal's. "Perhaps they did," he murmurs. "I never noticed – or if I noticed, I didn't care. None of them called to me like you do. None of them made me think 'Oh, there you are'."

Hannibal smiles. "Then I truly am the luckiest man alive."

Will laughs. "Silver tongue!" he says brightly, all melancholy gone from him like the sun wipes away the dark sky. He nuzzles Hannibal's chest, throws an arm around him, and sighs, settling down to attempt sleep once more. "That is one Roman custom I will let you keep – it pleases me greatly."

Hannibal grins, and kisses the top of his head. "I'm glad."

They sleep without trouble, and when the dawn comes, they rise and ride onward, following some direction Hannibal doesn't know, though he understands they are heading West, into the thickest part of Hibernia. Their horses carry them through fields and over rolling hills, every inch of the land vibrant and alive, chittering and happy despite the fast-encroaching winter.

They pass a few settlements – old marks of abandoned lives. Some of them Hannibal knows are from villages that ended up joining theirs, others still seem much older, and have been abandoned for longer. Towards the afternoon of their second day riding, they approach a tall stack of stones.

Will grins, and leads the horses over to it, dismounting with a cry of happiness. "Hannibal, come!" he says, and Hannibal dismounts his own horse, letting Will take his hand and lead him over. "This is a cairn," Will explains.

Hannibal eyes the structure. It is a tall thing, coming to their chests, made of various stones in all shapes and sizes, piled together in a way that looks very haphazard. Between each stone grows moss and dirt, small sprigs of wildflowers, that lend the structure some strength. Will searches around, and finds them two more stones, and hands one to Hannibal.

"My people use these to mark trails, or good places to hunt," he explains. "It is good luck for passing travelers to add to them, when they see one."

Hannibal smiles, brows rising, and he watches as Will carefully fits his stone – a small thing, barely larger than his palm – into a crag between two others. He pushes in just enough to make it secure, and steps back with a smile.

Hannibal adds his own, placing his stone on a flat rock at the top of the cairn. Will grins at him, and takes his hand once Hannibal's rock rattles, finds its comfortable place with its brothers, and settles to join the rest.

The wind giggles at them, like a mother watching her children play, tugging on Will's hair and their cloaks. "I have heard," Will says quietly, "in the North of Brittania, in the place the Romans call 'Caledonia', soldiers would place a stone on their cairns before a battle. One for each man. The survivors, at the end, would take a stone away, and leave the rest as a marker for the battle, to remember the dead."

Hannibal nods. "I imagine some of them are quite large, if that is the case."

Will nods as well. "Let us hope, if what I have seen comes to pass, this cairn is as large as when we left it." He sighs, and takes Hannibal's hand, leading them back to the horses. They mount them, and continue on. "Did your people have any such traditions?"

"If they did, I don't remember them," Hannibal replies, and wonders when he might have even cared for such a practice. Morbid is not the word for it, but he could not imagine taking apart such a great structure and seeing that it remains large by the end. Will hums, and Hannibal smiles. "Forgive me, darling, I'm afraid I'm not all that learned when it comes to my own people. I left them so long ago, and after being in Rome, knew I could not return, so I allowed myself to forget."

"Sometimes it's easier to forget," Will murmurs. He flexes his fingers around his reins, his eyes dark, and he lifts them to the sky, biting his lower lip. He chews on it, as though hungry, and sighs heavily. Hannibal wishes he could ease Will's aches, both in body and mind, and hates how helpless he feels, knowing he can't.

Hannibal tilts his head. "You said the solstice is a time when the veil between the living and the dead grows thin." Will's eyes sharpen, and he looks over, nodding. "Do you think it's possible to see any ghost there?"

Will breathes in, shallowly. "I see no reason why not." Then, he brightens, grinning. "Will you try to see your sister? I think you should – I would like to meet her."

Hannibal smiles. "If it is possible, yes, I think I would."

"We will ask my mother," Will says with another teasing smile. Then, he straightens, and clicks his tongue. "I grow tired of this pace. Let the bird fly on its tether, so we might run for real!"

Hannibal nods, and takes the bird from its cage. He fastens one end of the twine around its leg, and tucks the other end into the collar of his cloak. The crow caws, spreading its wings, and takes to the air as Will lets out a soft cry of happiness, and digs in with his heels. The horses begin to canter, and Hannibal grins as the crow takes flight, keeping pace easily.

They find a large river on the eve of their second day, and refill their waterskins, and wash their hands and faces. Hannibal puts the crow back in the cage, the bird panting open-mouthed from such a long flight. They tie the horses to a nearby tree and allow them to graze.

When the night is dark, there is no sound, until suddenly, there is a sound.

Hannibal and Will are immediately awake and alert. Hannibal has his sword, and draws it, keeping it low so the firelight doesn't glint off the blade. He hears a snap of branches underfoot, the rustle of fallen leaves.

Will crouches close to him, behind a thick cluster of bushes, his eyes dark and sharp as they listen, trying to pinpoint the direction from where the noises come. He brushes his hand on Hannibal's hip, jerks his head to the side, and Hannibal nods, prowling around Will. Will has his knife, and is ready, but Hannibal's sword is longer and in a blitz attack, he is stronger than Will while Will is starving.

He hears voices – two of them, male. They are speaking together in the Roman tongue.

Hannibal curses, and Will snarls softly. They creep closer.

"I am sure I saw them here," one man says. Hannibal frowns, tilting his head. He feels like he knows that voice.

The stranger's companion laughs. Answers, in the language of the Rhine; "They are hiding from us."

Hannibal blinks.

Will does, also, and then he smiles widely as a shadow moves between the trees, and he stands in plain view. Cups his hands, and calls in Latin; "My friends!"

The shadows grow still and silent. "My brothers!" Will calls again. "Do not hide from me. You were never meant for hunting."

One of the shadows melts into the figure of a tall man. His hair is longer, but the scar on his lip is unmistakable. So, too, the wide smile that bursts across his face when he sees them, and at his side, looking far better than he did when Hannibal last saw him, emerges Randall.

Francis and Randall lower their weapons as Hannibal stands, and the four of them let out crows of delight, rushing forward to embrace each other. Hannibal throws an arm around Francis' shoulders as Will and Randall tackle each other like puppies, grinning and laughing as they embrace.

Francis grips his forearm, and smiles. "Hello, brother, it has been a while," he says, in the Hibernian tongue.

"A strange coincidence indeed, for Will and I were just thinking of you," Hannibal replies. He claps a hand on Randall's shoulder when Randall parts from Will, and Will throws himself into Francis' arms, embracing him like they are old, dear friends. But they are – all treasured friends and trustworthy companions. "Have you been merely two days' ride from us this whole time?"

Francis grins. "No, Hannibal – Randall and I have traveled all through this blessed land. We have made friends wherever we went, and lived in a fishing town for a while, making our living and seeing much of the coast."

"It's why we returned," Randall murmurs, softer but no less joyous. "Roman vessels have been seen, testing the edges of this land. Trade ships, mostly, no warriors, but we feared they may have found you."

"And," Francis adds, "if those versed in the weather are to be believed, this winter will be harsher than those before it. We have missed you both dearly – and Alana, and Margot? How are they?"

"Alive and well," Will says with a grin. "Alana bore a son."

"That is happy news," Francis says, and Randall nods vigorously. His head tilts. "And you? Why are you not with them?"

"We are journeying to my mother's shrine," Will replies. "I wished to see her, and speak to the gods. My father has passed, and we need a new leader for the village. The gods will tell me, there, who is to lead us next."

Randall frowns. "Not you?"

Will shakes his head.

"Do you mean to venture on?" Hannibal asks. "I am glad we met on the road, but I know Alana and Margot will be happy to see you."

"Yes," Francis says with a nod. Beside Hannibal, he sees Will looking so happy, but also relieved. Francis and Randall are good fighters, and having them with the village if trouble does come will be a blessed advantage. "I have no desire to travel backwards," Francis adds with a laugh.

"It is good to see you," Will says earnestly, and clasps Randall's hands. "Come, eat with us! Tell us all your stories, and we will tell you ours, and celebrate the fate that saw us on the same road."

"A fine idea," Francis says. Randall grins at them, and pulls his bag from his shoulder. "We have food and wine aplenty. We will dine like we are all soldiers again, and poke jokes at our generals."

Hannibal laughs, and gestures for them all to return to the fire. They pass around a bottle of sweet, heavy wine, and eat readily from their stores of salted meat and bread. Hannibal and Will tell them of Eoin, the night of his birth, the night Will returned, and Will tells them of his year-long journey to find Hannibal again.

"I'm glad you did," Randall says quietly. "It was a terrible thing, to think you dead. I am overjoyed knowing it was not true."

"You're a tough one to kill," Francis agrees, smiling.

Will laughs. "Aren't we all?"

They learn that the last Roman ship sighted was in Eblana, where Hannibal and the rest first docked. A long ride away, but not by ship. Hannibal forces himself not to show any concern.

"Rest with us," he says. "And tell Margot and Alana we are well, and that we met. I know you will be welcomed with eager arms."

They nod. When dawn comes, they part to their respective horses – the same ones they took in the beginning, Hannibal notes, and greets the horses with fond smiles when Francis and Randall climb upon their mounts.

"May the road rise up to meet you, and the wind be always at your back," he tells them, repeating Alana's blessing.

Francis grins. "You have become a true native," he says, and clasps Hannibal's forearm one more time, above their brands. "Hibernia suits you, Hannibal."

"I daresay it suits us all," Hannibal replies, for he cannot deny that the four of them have flourished here.

Francis and Randall nod, and wait for Will and Hannibal to mount their horses, before they all part from each other with waves and fond smiles. Francis and Randall turn East, Hannibal and Will turn West, and resume their journey, feeling warmer and lighter for knowing their trusted friends are, finally, on their way home.

Chapter 5

"Something is on your mind."

Hannibal blinks, and draws his eyes away from the mesmerizing dance of the fire as it licks and curls around the few twigs and sticks they have gathered that were dry enough to light. It has rained for much of the day, and he and Will and the horses are soaked to the bone with the freezing rain. Even Will, with all his power and warmth, cannot stop the chill invading Hannibal's chest.

He covers the bird's cage with a spare blanket, hoping to protect it from the worst of the rain as they bed down for the night, and sighs, breath misting as the little flames sputter and die, unable to hold their own against the onslaught of wind and rain. The storm itself is not terrible, but it is relentless, and without proper firewood there is little chance of getting a warm meal, or any kind of light.

He leaves it be and turns to Will, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth as Will nuzzles his shoulder, pulling himself up tight to Hannibal's flank like a pup against the side of its mother. "Many things are on my mind," Hannibal replies, and kisses Will's flat, wet hair. It appears black, soaked as it is, with no sunlight to make him shine. "You, mostly."

Will huffs. "I came to buy a simple truth and receive silver lies in answer," he says, and nudges Hannibal with his elbow, smiling. "I command you speak openly."

Hannibal sighs through his nose, and tilts his head up, finds neither star nor moon gazing back at him, hidden behind the weight of such heavy rainclouds. "Why are you taking us South, Will?"

Will pauses, and lifts his head. He swallows, and says; "We had to skirt the mountains."

"The mountains are to the North," Hannibal replies. He smiles at the guilty look on Will's face. "I know this direction – you are taking us towards Eblana. Why?" But, of course, he knows why – that is the direction from which Francis and Randall rode, and they told them that is where the Roman ships were last sighted.

As cunning and clever as Will is, he is not a subtle man.

"My love," Hannibal says kindly, brushing Will's sodden hair from his cheek, "if you want to go, we will go, but you told me we must be at your mother's shrine for the solstice. Don't let your hatred and your fear steer you from our original course."

Will eyes him, in utter silence, for a long time. The only sound is the murmur of the rain and the bluster of the horses, the skittering of larger animals that are not bothered by the storm as they go about their business.

Then, he sighs, and closes his eyes, his face a mask of something akin to defeat. "You're right," he whispers. "Of course you're right. Why are you always right?"

It's said in jest, the disgruntled tone gentled by his smile and rolling eyes. "Well, I am older than you – I have had more time to learn to be so."

"If I could take it all from you – your wisdom, as much as your life, I would be like a god, I think," Will says brightly. Hannibal laughs, and pulls Will closer to his side. They move as one, discarding the pitiful attempt at a fire, and crawling under the large covering they have tied between two trees to shield them from the rain. The ground is wet and seeps through their bedding and clothes, and is far from comfortable. Hannibal is no stranger to discomfort, but he admits to himself that he will be grateful once they go home, and he can hold Will in their warm bed and keep him fed and sated.

As though sensing his thoughts, Will shivers and presses closer, and mouths at his neck. "I know, darling," Hannibal murmurs, closing his eyes, a strange, sharp helplessness overcoming him at the sound of Will's whine. He sighs, when Will goes still. "Would you have continued to starve, if you had managed to trick me, and gone to Eblana?"

"I wasn't trying to trick you; you simply never asked," Will replies, sullen and quiet. "Truthfully I don't know – I feel as though I am obeying some instinct inside me, that thinks little of the future, and reacts only to the here and now. When it comes time to eat, I would ask you to feed me. When it comes time to hunt, I would ask you to be at my side through it." He sighs, and lifts his eyes to meet Hannibal's in the darkness. They are brimming with gold, betraying his hunger. "Forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive," Hannibal says, and he means that. "I simply do not want to see you suffer, if there is anything in my power to do that lessens it."

Will smiles at him, and cups his face, kissing him warmly. Hannibal knows his hands, his mouth, are capable of such cruelty, has seen them commit such violence, and yet he touches Hannibal with all the sweetness of a man so much in love, that it drives away the cold and the discomfort, and leaves him feeling refreshed.

Will kisses him again, and again, pressing as close as he's able, sharing the damp heat gathering beneath their clothes. He sighs, and parts for breath, closing his eyes and tucking his face to Hannibal's neck. His nose is cold and Hannibal huffs, wrapping a hand in his hair and petting it from his nape.

"How long will it take now, to reach your mother's shrine?" he murmurs.

"Two more days, perhaps," Will replies. "Less, if we ride hard."

"When is the solstice?"

Will smiles, his lips pressing to Hannibal's neck. "Tomorrow night, it begins."

"Then we must ride hard," Hannibal says, and Will nods, sighing. Hannibal thinks it strange, that he would be willing to deny himself the chance to see his mother for the sake of a rumor of a foreign ship. How wildly, how recklessly, Will's hatred for Rome makes him act.

"Sleep," he says, and kisses Will's hair, wrapping his free arm around his mate's shoulders. "We will rise in a few hours, and make our way."

"We should release the bird," Will murmurs. "He slows us down."

Hannibal nods. "We can send him home in the morning," he replies. "With him, word that we are safe, and going to Eblana after we visit your mother."

Will nods, and stifles a yawn behind his hand. He falls asleep quickly, exhausted from his famine, and though Hannibal is tired from riding for so many hours during the day, he does not fall asleep for a long while after, content to simply listen to Will's breathing, and find comfort in his warmth.

They free the bird when the night is still dark, though the rain had ended for a time. To its leg Hannibal attaches a small piece of parchment, telling Margot and Alana that they are both safe, and almost at the shrine, but they will journey on to Eblana, afterwards. Francis and Randall should be there by now, and will keep them safe.

He writes it in Latin, since he does not know how to spell out Hibernian words – has learned the language only through speech. Will smiles, when he sees it, but says nothing. They let the bird go and then saddle and load the horses, and when they ride it is with swift pace, North and West towards where Will was leading them before. Hannibal eats on horseback, and Will doesn't eat at all. He is pale with hunger, and his eyes no longer show any blue, but glimmering gold, betraying how weak and starving he is. It's the longest Hannibal has seen him go without eating, since Hannibal first fed him, and since Will returned to him, and though he is sure Will's pride does not extend so far that he will starve to death before asking for food, he worries.

They ride swiftly, until the horses are blustering with exhaustion and both men and animals are soaked with sweat, until finally there appears before them a tiny copse of trees, all alone in the middle of a field. No more than twenty oaks, but they are large, and their canopy stretches out far beyond the central line of their trunks. Beneath the boughs the grass grows almost two feet tall, and sways in a breeze that, this far away, does not touch Hannibal and Will.

Will raises his hand, calling for a halt, and dismounts. He stumbles, and Hannibal hurries to catch him, until Will finds his strength and pushes himself upright. "I'm okay," he says, and Hannibal wants to snarl and snap his teeth, to growl 'No, no you're not'. But he resists. As soon as this is done, he will feed Will until Will bursts with life and energy again.

Will turns to him, and gives him a thin smile. "We must untack the horses completely," he says. "Remove anything not natural from their skins – and do the same to ourselves. Anything made by man that falls beneath the shadow of the trees will burn."

Hannibal's brows rise, but he nods, and helps Will remove the saddles and bridles from the horses, as well as their bedding, their blankets, and their food and waterskins. Then, Will begins to shed his clothes – his cloak, first, which he drapes across their things, tucked behind a stump of a tree that was cut down many years ago and now grows thick with mushrooms. Hannibal presses his lips together, and lifts his head, making sure there is no sign of either stranger or thief, and follows suit.

Will is bare before Hannibal sheds all of his clothes, and sighs, tipping his head up to the soft grey sun, hidden behind what remains of the storm clouds. He is truly beautiful, and Hannibal cannot help admire the strength in his shoulders, the thickness of his thighs and chest – despite his hunger, he is strong. The scars on his body, made by steel and whip, only serve to make him look more wild, more untamed. He is, at his center, the heart of his land, and Hannibal looks at him and knows that it will never break, no matter what happens.

Will turns to him, and smiles, holding his hand out as Hannibal steps out of his shoes, similarly naked. Will's golden eyes rake down him in a similar way as Hannibal looked at him, though significantly sharper, and more hungry.

Hannibal smiles, and kisses his knuckles. "Soon, my love," he promises.

Will nods, and yet tugs him close, and fits his teeth in a teasing bite to Hannibal's shoulder, before he pulls away and sighs. "Come," he says, and eyes the setting sun. "We don't have much time."

Hannibal nods, and follows Will into the center of the open space. At the edge of the taller grass there sits a ring of stones, all of them equally flat and rounded at the edges like what would have built a house. This is a house, he realizes – a place where the gods of his land can come and rest.

There is a tiny break in the stones, and Will steps through it carefully, guiding Hannibal to do the same. They walk through the grasses and Hannibal feels strange, as his feet trample the long strands. He thinks he can feel discomfort, like a too-tight shirt or how a horse must feel with a man on its back, and wonders if this is like when the forest speaks to Will; if Will can feel it too.

The trees are not placed in a haphazard way that appears natural, but equally spaced apart, wide enough for a single man to pass through them. Will goes first, entering the ring of trees, and as Hannibal follows, the boughs creek and turn their mighty heads, to look upon the little flies that have landed on their forehead.

"We must speak quietly in this place," Will whispers.

Hannibal nods. The air feels holy, in a way no temple in Rome he ever entered did. Those places were there for profit, for the greedy grip of men to speak to their equally petty gods. They went to those temples to place their bribes and lust after their priestesses; to flaunt their fine jewelry and ask in booming voices for the blessings of their gods.

This place holds none of that pomp, none of the flare, and yet Hannibal can feel the power thrumming in the air, rising up through the soles of his bare feet and burning in his blood.

The ground is perfectly flat inside the ring of trees, pressed beneath their weight like sand, and in every footstep Will leaves, Hannibal can see flowers blooming behind him. He is careful not to step on them, leaving his own tracks, and sees his own imprints blossoming with the same.

Will looks behind them, and laughs. "We are welcome here," he says, and points to the flowers. "If we were not, nothing would grow, and we would find nothing in this place."

Hannibal doesn't understand how Will knows that, but he must know. He has been here before, after all. "Have you ever been unwelcome?" he asks, for this is the place of his mother's shrine, and Hannibal cannot imagine any god of Will's land would not want him here.

Will smiles, and shakes his head. He takes Hannibal's hand and leads him on, through a second ring of trees, thinner but no less mighty. Once past those, Hannibal sees what they have come here for. It is not a shrine as Romans would call it – there is no altar, no throne, no statue depicting any certain god, but the air itself feels alive with magic, as though there are a great hoard of magical creatures inside it, and they have all perked up and are staring curiously at them.

Inside this ring of trees is a single pool of water, mirror-like for its flatness. No wind or dripping water touches it, despite the fact that the leaves above them cling to the rain from the recent storm. They cup their water greedily and will not let it fall on Hannibal, Will, or the pool.

Around the edge of the water grow big red flowers, and flitting between the flowers are bees and hummingbirds, and Hannibal imagines they are nature's little gardeners, making sure the flowers stay large and healthy, spreading pollen to all corners of the land. Oh, yes, there is magic in this place, and Hannibal's soul smiles at the feeling of it.

Will sighs, and stops at the edges of the flowers, and sits. Hannibal follows suit, mimicking Will's posture – legs crossed, hands resting in his lap. Will closes his eyes and tilts his head up, and a single shining leaf above them gives up its prize, and drips cold water onto his forehead.

Will laughs, but does not wipe his face clean. He opens his eyes and they are no longer gold, but no longer blue, either – they shine silver, like the mirror of the pool, like the touch of a ghost and the strike of lightning. Hannibal wants to touch him, but resists, not knowing what to do.

Will holds out his hands, cupped as though to gather water, and blinks at Hannibal, nodding and smiling when he does the same. Two hummingbirds look up at them, and fly to their hands, settling like they have made nests. Their wings are blood-red, their chests and heads the emerald green of rich grass, their beady black eyes shining with intelligence.

"Speak the name of the one you wish to see," Will whispers.

"Mischa," Hannibal says.

"Shannon," Will echoes.

The birds look at them a moment longer, and then look at each other, and take flight, flitting back to the pool. They land upon a flower each, and Hannibal watches, wide-eyed and breathless, as the large petals of the flowers curl around the birds, swallowing them whole.

"Don't worry for them," Will says, and touches his knee. "To cross the bridge from this life to the next, a sacrifice must be made. When we are done here, the flowers will let them go."

Hannibal nods. For a long while, there is nothing but the buzzing of the bees and the fluttering wings of the remaining birds. Will looks up, and the sky is growing very dark. Hannibal can hear rain falling, though nothing drips on them.

Then, Will's hand snaps out, and grips Hannibal's wrist tightly. "There," he says, and Hannibal follows his silver gaze to the still pool. Only now, it is not still, but rippling as though a large beast dwells beneath it. From the pool rises a hand, caked in silver, small and feminine. It extends to an arm, and a slim shoulder. The girl who rises from the pool is naked as they are, and unbearably frail looking, skeletal almost, with flat, flaxen hair. She rises until she is standing on the pool, and shakes herself free, the silver melting away to reveal pale skin and bright blue eyes, her hair coming to her shoulders, the silver sliding off her body to reform in the pool.

Hannibal gasps, for it is Mischa. He hasn't seen her for many years, but now, seeing her again, her memory grows sharp and new in his mind. He rises, and she looks at him, and smiles widely. When she speaks, it is in their native tongue.

"Hello, brother!"

She leaps from the pool and into his arms, laughing, and Hannibal embraces her tightly, falling to his knees and burying his face in her thin hair. She does not have the warmth of real life in her, but feels so solid otherwise, as real as Will or the horse Hannibal rode to get here.

He pulls back, holding her at arm's length, and she smiles and cups his face. "You're an old man now," she teases. "You look like our father!"

Hannibal's throat goes tight, his heart beating out an odd off-rhythm drum as he laughs, and hugs her again. "And you are the same," he replies. She giggles, and dances away from him, sauntering to the ring of trees and reaching out to run her hand along the trunks. Hannibal follows her with his eyes, and then looks back to Will.

Will smiles warmly at him. "Go," he urges gently. "I must wait for my mother. She will be able to travel within the shadow of the trees, but no farther."

Hannibal nods, and kisses Will's hand. "I will return shortly," he promises, for he does want to meet Will's mother, as well. Then, he turns, and follows Mischa through the first ring of trees, to where their footprints have left flowers. Mischa steps into one of his, and giggles as though ticklish.

"You've been very busy, brother," she says, grinning up at him. She is the same as when she died, and comes no higher than his chest. "I've missed you!"

"And I have missed you, Mischa," Hannibal whispers, still not quite able to believe that she is here, speaking to him. But it must be her, it must be. "What is it like, where you are?"

"I run around in the walls of our home, before it was destroyed," she says. She bends down and plucks some of the flowers, idly pulling on the petals so they fall around her feet. "Mother is there, and father too. I built it myself, and made it ready for them, since I died first."

Hannibal's chest clenches with sorrow. "I would have tried to save you, if I could."

"But you could not, because you were far away, fighting someone else's war," she says with a shrug. "And now, what? Will you fight another war? The dead whisper to each other, Hannibal – they know things. I hear the scream of pigs and lambs and know they are calling for you."

"What do you mean?" Hannibal asks, frowning.

"The dead," Mischa tells him. "The slaves that fell because of…your companion." Her nose wrinkles in distaste, surprising Hannibal. "And your old master, and all his friends. People your friend have killed."

"Will is not just my friend," Hannibal protests. "He is mine, and I am his."

"But you're not, are you?" Mischa says, and looks up at him. "You are married to a Roman woman."

Hannibal huffs. "Still as tenacious as ever, I see," he says, and gently tucks a strand of her hair behind her cheek. "Do they cry frightfully loud?"

"I am not afraid of them; they can't hurt me." She grins at him, widely. "I eat them. The one called Mason is a nasty brute. I quite enjoy the taste of his meat."

Hannibal blinks, surprised. "He shares the afterlife with you?"

"I will say this, for the man you love," Mischa replies; "His magic sent them to us. All of them. I'm not sure how it works, but one day our castle had a stable, and then it had a stable and a pig pen, and a field full of little lambs. They cry for your blood, and for Will's." She smiles. "You should join us! Again and again and again, we can kill them."

Hannibal sighs, and shakes his head. "I miss you all dearly, but I am in no hurry to join you in the afterlife."

She regards him with an arched brow, and lets the flowers fall. "But you will join us," she says, softly. Hannibal tilts his head. "One day. Won't you?"

"Would Will be welcome there?"

Her nose wrinkles. "He is not of our land."

"Neither was Mason or his house."

"He cannot join us!" she says. "He would be another little lamb, or maybe a pig. Or maybe a lion, and he would eat all our prey! No, he cannot join us."

Hannibal sighs, and shakes his head. "Then I cannot join you," he says. Though it pains him to say it, he has survived many years without his family, and remade his own, now. He will not part with Will, for anything, even death.

She huffs, and rolls her eyes. Then, her bad humor dispels, and she looks around at the rings of trees. "This place feels powerful," she murmurs. "Where are we?"

"In Will's land, at his mother's shrine. He gave me the power to speak to you."

"Then I suppose I should thank him," she declares, and walks back through the trees. Hannibal follows her, nervous for a reason he can't quite explain. He finds Will as they left him, only now he is not alone. Beside him sits a woman, also bare, with long dark brown hair that curls in waves much like Will's. She is slim, and pale, and Will inherited her smile. She is cupping his face.

She turns her head, and lifts a single brow in a way so similar to Will's that it makes Hannibal's chest warm. "Hello, there," she says, and stands. Will does also, and his eyes are no longer silver, but back to that mesh of brilliant blue and starving gold. "You must be the one who brought my son back to me."

"I cannot claim all of that pride, but yes, I am he," Hannibal replies, and bows his head. "It's an honor to meet you, Shannon."

She laughs – she laughs like Will laughs, bright and happy – and claps her hands together. "Come, come closer, let me look at you," she says. Hannibal approaches her, and Mischa prowls around his flank, hiding like a child behind her mother's legs. Shannon cups Hannibal's face, and lets out a soft noise. "You have the soul of a hunter in you."

Hannibal smiles.

"Mama," Will says, and draws her attention away again, her hands dropping, "thank you for coming here today."

"Of course, my life and love, I would not have missed it!"

"Is my father with you?"

She nods, and smiles. "He met me on the hill that overlooks the lake. He is as strong as the day I left." She sighs, and presses her lips together. "I am sorry that I left for so long, that I had to leave so early."

Will touches her hand, and shakes his head. "It was the will of the gods," he murmurs, soft with forgiveness. Will does not think of death as so permanent as men like Hannibal do. She

smiles at him, and then steps back, blinking down at Mischa as she forces her way between them.

"You are Will," she says, and she speaks the Hibernian tongue as a native now. Hannibal blinks in surprise, and wonders if the dead go into the new world knowing all there is to know. Mischa eyes Will with a haughty air, her hands on her hips in that way little girls tend to stand at the age where they command the world. The way Margot used to stand, and Alana too, for a time. Will nods, and crouches down so they are at eye level. "My brother tells me he will not join our family when he dies. What say you?"

Will blinks at her, and presses his lips together. "The dead cannot command the living to join them, Mischa," he says kindly. "Any more than the living could command the dead to rise up from their graves and speak to them."

"And yet is that not what you have done?" she demands.

"Mischa," Hannibal says, scolding. "I thought you came here to thank him."

She huffs, and tosses her hair, folding her arms across her chest. She looks sullen, but not angry. "Yes," she says. "And I do thank him. But I will also tell him he is a wicked thing, for making you want to cast us aside like we were nothing more than a rock in your shoe."

Hannibal sighs, and meets Will's eyes when Will looks up at him. He shrugs helplessly.

Will smiles. "You and your brother share a passionate nature," he tells her, looking back to Mischa. "I would like us to be friends, Mischa."

"I am not anyone's friend, or anyone's enemy." She glances at Hannibal, and grins, "Except the pigs'."

Will frowns. "Pigs?" he repeats.

Her grin widens, and then she yawns, and frowns down at the hand she raised to cover it. Will sighs, and stands, taking her hand in both his own and gripping gently. "It's your first trip to the other side, little one," he says, and nods to the pool. "You do not have the strength to remain here for as long as others."

She glares at him, and then at the pool. It ripples again, like the flutter of a waving mother calling her in for supper. "Would you like to visit again, sometime?" Will asks. "The magic here is powerful enough twice a year to form a bridge."

"Yes!" she declares. "I have further words for you."

Hannibal smiles, and Will lets her go and Mischa runs to him, embracing him tightly. "Rest now, Mischa," he tells her, petting her soft, thin hair. "I will call for you again when I am able."

She nods, and huffs, rolling her eyes. "See to it that you do!" Then, she turns, and walks into the pool. The silver water rises up and swallows her, and she melts through the surface, disappearing as though she was never there.

Next to the pool, one of the flowers opens, and the bird within it flies away.

Shannon sighs. "Children are seldom easy to reason with," she says kindly, and smiles at Hannibal. He nods to her, for he cannot disagree. "Now, Will, why have you summoned me here? I love our talks, but it has been so long, and much has changed. I see your weariness sitting on you like a cloak – have you been eating?"

"I could not," Will replies, shaking his head. "Hunger…clears my vision, lets me see what I need to see. I needed to see, before I came to you."

Her lips purse, and in her face is such a motherly exacerbation that Hannibal hides a smile behind his hand. "Very well, then, I will not keep you starving a moment longer. Ask your questions, and I will be on my way and leave you to your feast."

Will sighs, and looks down, rubbing the back of his neck in a sheepish gesture. "I have so many," he says, and looks to Hannibal helplessly. "I don't know where to start."

"Start at the beginning," Shannon says, and leads them all to the side of the pool, where they once again take their seats on the soft, cool ground. "When last we spoke, you were afraid of a famine. Your father has told me much of what happened before you ventured off to Rome, and a little of after. I would have you tell me what is between, and what you need to know of the future."

Will nods, looking down at their hands. They are gripping each other at the wrists, fingers clasped, Shannon's skin very pale but solid enough to look as though she might be real. Hannibal sits between them, his eyes mostly on Will, for Will always has captured his attention most thoroughly.

"Well," Will says, and smiles. "I suppose it began when I boarded the boat to Roma…"

Chapter 6

Will talks, and tells their tale, and by the time he is done, the clearing is dark under nightfall, the trees shivering in the chilly night air. The pool, once silver, now appears black, and Will's voice is hoarse from use, his shoulders sagging with weariness.

Shannon gazes between them, her lips pressed into a thin line, and then she sighs. "So much has happened," she murmurs, and shakes her head. Her eyes are bright, shining with tears she will not shed, as she looks to Hannibal again. "I cannot imagine your suffering in that land. I will be sure to thank the gods that you were able to find us here."

"As I should thank you, for your willingness to bear Will in the first place," Hannibal replies with a nod of his head. "I cannot imagine my life without him. I am sure, had we never met, I would still be in Rome, whiling away my twilight years in abject misery."

For that much is true – if nothing else, Will has made him feel more alive than ever.

She smiles at him kindly, and looks back to her son, petting over his wrists. "You came to me to ask for my help in naming your father's successor," she says, "but I feel as though that has been resolved already. Something else weighs heavy on your heart."

Will nods, swallowing harshly, his fingers tightening around the ghostly form of his mother. "I just…. Will it ever be over?" he asks, raising his eyes. "Will there be a time where I need not fear for my friends, and my tribe?"

Shannon smiles at him. "You sound like your father," she murmurs, wistful and fond. "Always thinking of how the world might crush you if you falter but for a moment. I will tell you this – your father, strong and brave though he was, could not have been half the man he became without the strength of his friends, and you, to see him through it."

Will frowns.

"It is through unity that we are our strongest, Will," she tells him. "Just as the trees grow together to form a forest, and the wolves nestle and hunt in their packs. Whatever the course is for your future, you cannot do it alone." She looks at Hannibal, meaningfully. "Neither of you can."

Will lets out a soft, aggravated noise, pulling his hands back. "I don't understand."

"The weight of the world is not for one single man to bear," Shannon murmurs. "Yet one drop too many will burst a dam, or flood a field. One straw atop multitudes can break the beast who bears it. But one flower cannot be called a garden."

Will's eyes are dark, shining gold in the nighttime air. He rubs his hand over his mouth and sighs.

Her head tilts, hair falling in cascading curls down her shoulder. "There is something else," she says.

Will nods, his eyes closing. He rolls his shoulders and Hannibal, unable to help himself, reaches out and gently squeezes the back of Will's neck. Will goes lax, a smile making his mouth twitch up tiredly, and their eyes meet for a long moment, before Will sighs again and looks back to his mother.

"Hannibal married a Roman woman," he tells her. "I do not know the Roman gods, but I fear his soul might be bound to hers, when they pass on to the next life." Shannon hums, pressing her lips together. "Do you know of a way to break that bond?"

She blinks at them, and hums, tilting her head up. "No," she admits, and despite himself, Hannibal feels a sharp pang of disappointment. "I only know of such things in our land, and I don't know if binding the both of you together would undo it, or simply tie the three of you to the same fate."

Will nods, shivering, and Hannibal wishes he could drape his cloak across Will's back to shield him from the cold. He looks pale, and Hannibal knows he is hungry, weakening by the minute. He cannot imagine the kind of power it is taking to maintain a connection to the afterlife for so long.

"But I can ask," Shannon adds kindly, and reaches forward to touch Will's hands. "Come visit me in the next solstice, and I will do my best to have an answer for you."

Will smiles gratefully. "Thank you, mama."

Her smile widens, and she nods, and stands. "I must go now," she says, and bends down to cup Will's cheeks, tilting his head up, and places a gentle kiss on his forehead. Then, to Hannibal's surprise, she does the same to him, and her touch is cool like a fresh breeze from the ocean. She pulls away and gives them both another fond, motherly smile. "Go and be safe, and I will see you when the time is right."

Will nods, and stands, walking with her back to the pool. He helps her onto it as though she is a noblewoman ascending the steps to a carriage, and she turns and gives them a wide grin and a little wave, before the silver in the pool rises up – or perhaps she sinks back down into it.

She melts underneath the surface of the pool, and the flower holding her bird unfurls, and it flits away with a soft chirp.

Will trembles, and Hannibal rises and goes to him, embracing him tightly as Will's knees give out. "My love," he murmurs to Will's hair, petting down to his shaking hands. "Come, we must get you warm before you catch a chill."

Will doesn't protest, merely nods and clings to him as Hannibal helps him back to his feet, and leads him from the inner ring of trees, through them, and out to the barren grass and wide, open field. Their belongings have not been touched, and Hannibal quickly throws both his and Will's cloak over Will, dresses back in his trousers and boots and shirt, and lights a small fire as Will sits and shivers in the darkness.

"What do you think she meant?" Will murmurs, just as the flames begin to catch, licking at the meagre offering of sticks Hannibal managed to forage during their time in the trees, and kept strapped to his saddlebags for a time just like this. "She said I could not continue alone, but I'm not alone – I have you."

"Perhaps it stinks too much of hubris to think we would overthrow Rome a second time," Hannibal says with a smile. "And, even back at Mason's, we did not – *could not* have – won that battle on our own. We had help."

"Allies," Will says with a small nod, his eyes on the fire. In the warm, orange light, the gold in his eyes is brilliant and stark. "My father used to say that friendships made more powerful allies than steel and cunning ever could." He huffs, mouth curling into a fond smile. "I suppose that is true. Mason had no friends, and now he's fish food."

Hannibal laughs, and moves from the fire once he's sure it will not burn out too quickly. Will lifts up their cloaks, allowing Hannibal to burrow under them. Will does not have the strength to keep them warm as he normally does, and he nuzzles close to Hannibal's side, his nose to Hannibal's neck. He sighs, and pulls the cloaks tightly around them.

Hannibal wraps an arm around his shoulders, brushing his thumb up and down Will's arm. "We should find shelter," he murmurs, and in the darkness tries to spy the horses – finds them, black shadows amidst the shapeless void, grazing lazily a little way away from them.

Will nods, absently.

"Will you eat, now?" Hannibal asks.

Will nods again, sighing as Hannibal pulls back to reach for their saddlebags, takes out the bag containing meat and provisions. He hands Will a hearty amount of jerky, and Will eats it, nose wrinkled against the taste, but eager enough to fill his belly with something nourishing.

"The tribe has been growing," he says softly. "Month by month, but I am still afraid. We have no steel armor, very few weapons, almost no defenses except what nature provides." He swallows, and adds, "And winter is almost here."

"Perhaps Francis and Randall have friends," Hannibal reminds him. "They said they made friends wherever they went – we can return home, and ask them."

Will seems heartened by that. "I'd like to go home," he confesses. "Though I fear it will only delay from our course, it would be so prideful and reckless of me to ignore the words of the gods." He huffs. "And my mother – she is very wise, and knows far more than I ever will."

"I'm glad I was able to meet her," Hannibal says.

"Me too," Will replies. He finishes his food and sighs, lashes dipping low, and leans against Hannibal again. "I'm tired," he says, and Hannibal can feel the ache in him, a dry, parched feeling like coarse sand underfoot.

He pulls the cloaks around him, throws another few sticks on the fire, and pets over Will's face as he sighs. "Would you like me to feed you? I can offer you my wrist, if you're still hungry."

Will shakes his head, but turns and leans in for a kiss that Hannibal is more than happy to give. "Feed me in the morning," he demands softly. "When the sun will keep us warm."

Hannibal smiles, and they settle on their sides, Will tucked close to Hannibal's chest and one cloak shielding them from the chilled ground, the other draped over their bodies. "As you wish, my love."

They wake to birdsong, warm and mercifully dry, untroubled by storms. The fire died out during the night, but the sun is shining brightly down upon them, not a cloud in the sky to soften her gaze, and with Will pressed tight to him, Hannibal is very warm and comfortable.

Will stirs, tightening his grip on Hannibal's shirt, at the back – tugs and presses until the fabric pulls tight. His eyes open when Hannibal touches his cheek, and they're so bright with gold there is almost no blue left to them – what little remains has turned green at the edges, vibrant as spring grass.

They don't speak. Will pushes Hannibal until he rolls onto his back, catches his mouth and kisses him deeply, mounting his thighs and settling heavy in his lap. Hannibal's hands flatten on his hips instinctively, gripping the jutting bone – Will is so pale and thin, so obviously starving. Hannibal wants to fill him to bursting.

Will pulls back with a gasp, the black center of his eyes widening to eclipse the gold. He growls, low in his chest, and drags his nails down Hannibal's belly, to his trousers, yanking them and tugging them down so that his cock is exposed. He wraps a hand around it and Hannibal shivers, running his hands gently up Will's heaving flanks, tracing along every scar, every old wound. He is unblemished by bruises, no marks of Hannibal's passion on him, and that thought is unbearable, in that moment.

He rears up as Will spits on his fingers, slicking Hannibal's cock, and takes Will by the neck, parting his jaws and sucking a deep, blooming bruise to his beloved's neck. Will moans, free hand flying to Hannibal's hair, threading through and fisting tight as he shifts his weight, guides Hannibal's cockhead to his entrance, and sinks down. He's tight, and dry on the inside, but he takes Hannibal with a focused determination, and Hannibal kisses the crease between his brows, the tension in his jaw, closes his eyes and trembles as Will clenches up tightly around him and sinks down until his thighs rest against Hannibal's.

"Don't tease," he whispers, demands, begs. Hannibal nods, and tilts his head, baring his neck to Will, who takes the offering eagerly, bites until he breaks skin and swallows a heavy mouthful, blood leaking warm and wet and pooling at Hannibal's collarbone.

Hannibal snarls, gripping Will tight and rolling him to his back, so he can tuck Will's knees above his arms, fold Will and pin him down as Will clings to him and drinks, so he can use Will's body as fiercely as he's able until Will is sated. Will isn't hard, not enough energy in him to respond in that way, and it reminds Hannibal of when they reunited all those years ago, of how Will begged for him and bit him and used Hannibal until he could barely walk.

Further, those memories bring the year of Will's absence, the deep-seated and throbbing ache of loss that echoes in Hannibal like a wound that will never quite heal properly. He clings to Will, lifts him into his thrusts and kisses over Will's thrumming pulse as Will licks his neck clean, pawing at his hair, his shoulders, down his back.

"*Hannibal*," he gasps, throwing his head back, panting up to the sky. He digs his nails into Hannibal's back, thighs tightening, urging him on. "Please, *please*."

Will's magic tugs on his heart, down his spine, through his stomach. Whatever is in Will that feeds on this, it is a ravenous thing, and so-long denied Will's sweet heat, his desperate and feral love, Hannibal doesn't last long. He presses as deep as he can into Will and stifles his moan into Will's neck, rutting his hips tight to Will's flesh, one hand releasing him and tugging at his hair instead as Will shivers, and sighs.

The pleasure crests like a wave, and on the back of it comes another, a lingering tide that tugs, *tugs*, and Hannibal can't stop moving – he won't, he has been Will long enough to know that now, that he won't be able to pull away until Will is satisfied.

Will bites him again, rakes his nails down Hannibal's spine to raise red lines on either side of it, moans sweetly as Hannibal presses on the backs of his thighs, folding him further. His thumb finds the old scar he left with his own blade, the morning he found out about Mason's plan to marry him off to Margot. He kisses Will's shoulder, where Pazzi cut him. Nuzzles Will's flank, where one of the Easterner's men managed to cleave him open.

He fucks Will until he can't hold back anymore, and fills him again, and Will's lashes flutter, the sound that escapes his throat is one raw and soft, heavy with satisfaction. He smiles, when Hannibal lifts his head, and pulls him into a kiss, and Hannibal is glad, when he pulls back, to see the natural, beautiful blue returning to Will's eyes.

He pulls out with a wince, and huffs a laugh as he hears the rumble of distant storm clouds.

"Will it rain every time I feed you, I wonder?" he says, only half-teasing, for he knows Will and the storms, the water of this land, the life in it, are as connected as a tree to its roots. Will grins at him, shoulders lifting in a playful shrug, and kisses him again.

"Maybe if you keep me fed enough, I can convince the oceans to swallow the Roman ships whole, and all this worrying will be for nothing," he replies. Hannibal huffs again, and rises, correcting his clothes. He finds Will's and hands them over, shouldering his cloak as Will dresses, and then they both go to corral the horses.

They re-saddle and load them, and ride away from the shrine. As they go, Hannibal cannot help but feel as though he's being watched, though when he turns to look, he sees only the trees – no ghostly eyes or flashes of specters.

Will laughs, noticing. "Be at ease," he says gently. "The dead know they belong there."

Hannibal nods. "Mischa told me that Mason and all his kin are living as pigs and sheep in the afterlife, in my family's castle, and they squeal and get slaughtered every day." Will hums. "She said your magic put them there."

Will hums again, and shrugs. He seems neither surprised nor in disagreement at the suggestion. "Perhaps it is so," he says, and grins Hannibal's way. "I don't have the power to tell the dead 'go here' or 'do this'. But the ocean may have wished for them a fate worse than death – imagine, one such as Mason, living every day as a damned piece of meat to be killed and eaten by a child."

Hannibal smiles, despite himself. "A fitting punishment," he says, "though it troubles me to think who else, of the innocent, might have shared that fate."

"Oh?"

"Mischa told me you would not be welcome there," he adds. "I don't think anyone would, except myself, but I have no desire to go where you could not follow."

Will presses his lips together, and nods, looking forward. "I don't know the future, Hannibal," he says, quietly, in deep contemplation. "I know even less of what waits for us beyond the veil of death. But as I said before, I do not think this is the first life we have shared, nor will it be the last. So, I cannot imagine there exists a future for us, no matter what plane of existence we travel, that would see us separated."

"I'd like to think that is so, as well," Hannibal replies.

"Good!" Will says, brightening immediately. He sighs, and stretches in the saddle, turns his face up to the sun. "Come, let us run now – I wish to be home before the snow comes, and it will come soon."

Hannibal nods in agreement. The storm clouds summoned by Will's hunger do not look like they contain rain, but ice and freezing snow. They are still a week away from the tribe, and will want to move quickly, if Will intends to venture to Eblana and back before winter sets in and makes the mountains impassible.

They ride swiftly, and stop only for a few hours a night – long enough for them to rest the horses, and for Hannibal to feed Will, until his eyes shine with satisfaction and he is able to react to Hannibal's touches as he used to, when he was well-fed. Will cries echo in the thunder, stir up the wind, and by the time they have the village in their sights, the air is very cold and the wind is blowing constantly, and there comes, as they settle the horses and go to their house, the first flurries of snow.

There is a bonfire, and around it are several of the villagers. Alana, Margot, and Eoin are gathered by Francis and Randall, sharing that heavy drink Hibernians are so fond of. Randall sees them first, and stands with a cry, embracing Will tightly as they approach.

"Oh, thank all the gods you're safe!" Alana says, and hugs Hannibal as they enter the glow of the fire. Margot smiles at them, and is holding Eoin, asleep in her arms, so she does not rise, nor greet them with anything more than a nod. "We were starting to worry."

"I think, as long as there are clouds in the sky, we can be certain Will is safe," Francis says, quietly for the sake of the sleeping child. He clasps Hannibal on the forearm, and then Will when Randall pulls away from him, all of them smiling, pleased to see each other happy and safe. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yes and no," Will replies, settling on one of the logs with a sigh. Hannibal sits beside him, and wraps an arm around his shoulders. "I would have words with all of you, but they can wait. For now, I simply want to enjoy being home."

As he speaks, Niamh separates herself from her cluster of villagers, and approaches Will with a smile. "Good to have you back," she says, and Will nods to her. "Have the gods named a successor?"

"Who has been leading, in our absence?"

Her head tilts. "I have been," she says. "With help from Alana, and Margot, and, well -." She gives him a warm smile and shrugs. "I suppose we have all been taking a small piece of the running of this place, and helping each other."

Will's eyes flash with interest. "The gods told me a single flower cannot be called a garden," he murmurs. "I did not know what it meant, but I think I do now." He smiles. "Perhaps it is time that we consider no one man or woman should lead us – that we should make decisions with many voices, and many ideas."

Niamh's eyes widen, and she looks to Hannibal in question, but he has no further information to give her. "Like…a council?" she hazards.

Will nods. "Why not?" he asks with a shrug. "I have heard in Rome that there are many things decided by a large group of men. I'm not saying we become like then, but why should one man decide the fate of many, with no input or room for debate?"

She huffs a laugh, and shakes her head with a fond smile. "You are much changed, Will," she says, but sounds happy for it. "But I see no reason why we should not try."

Will nods. "Every night, we can ask if there are issues, needs, anything that must be done to ensure our survival. We can discuss it, and move forward through a…vote." He lifts his shoulders in a shrug. "Perhaps the gods will tell me something different, as time passes, but no man should carry the weight of the world alone."

Hannibal hides his smile by pressing a kiss to Will's hair.

Niamh gives them another fond look, and murmurs something affectionate under her breath, before she turns to leave. Hannibal smiles, and whispers into Will's ear; "The gods told you all that, hmm?"

Will grins at him. "My mother always spoke to them," he replies. "It would be very arrogant of me to ignore her advice."

"I wonder, perhaps, if this new way of government will draw attention," Hannibal muses aloud. "More allies. Our numbers may only grow in the coming months."

"We can only hope," Will murmurs. He cups Hannibal's face, kisses him deeply, until Hannibal's stomach goes tense with heat and he tightens his arm around Will's shoulders. Will pulls back, eyes dark, and he swallows harshly, and stands.

"Retiring so soon?" Margot asks, blinking up at them.

"The journey was long," Hannibal replies, squeezing Will's hand as Will pulls him to his feet. "We shall see you all in the morning – as Will said, there are some things we must discuss."

She nods, and Alana stands to give Will a tight hug, and Hannibal exchanges nods with Francis and Randall, before he allows Will to pull him from the fire, towards their house. Bua is there, and lifts his head, tail wagging in greeting as he woofs at them. Will pats the dog's head with a fond smile, and leads the way inside.

"Are you very tired, my love?" Hannibal murmurs, as Will sheds his cloak and boots, and climbs onto their pallet of furs and blankets, tugging Hannibal to lie over him.

Will hums, eyes shining even in the darkness, and kisses him passionately, spreads his legs and tightens his thighs around Hannibal's hips. "Not that tired," he replies, impish and bright, and Hannibal laughs into their next kiss.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal and Will wake late in the morning, worn out from their journey, and Hannibal's body gives a soft thrum of protest at the aches of his muscles and bones. Will was a ravenous thing in his bed last night, and had Hannibal mount him many times, filling him again and again until there was not a flicker of gold in Will's eyes, and the rains pelted heavy against the roof of their house.

They dress, exchanging soft kisses and warm smiles throughout, and head to the main area of the village. The pyre has been dismantled and Hannibal sees several of the villagers coming and going from Bill's house, clearing out the space of his belongings, to be divided amongst those in need – useful things like his blankets and his clothes and his weapons – and the rest will be buried with what remains of his bones.

Will sighs, but Hannibal is glad to see only a small shadow of sorrow passing across his face. He offers Hannibal a warm smile, and driven by some instinct Hannibal can only follow, Will leads the way to the large enclosed field wherein the horses are kept. Randall and Francis' horses have joined their little herd, the new mare and gelding submitting happily to Will's stallion as he accepts them into the fold.

Will presses his lips together, his eyes on Hannibal's mare. "Any day now," he says, resting his forearms against the top of the fence. Hannibal will admit she looks almost fit to burst with her foal, and he looks to the sky to see it dark with new clouds, and the air is frightfully cold.

"We should give her shelter," he says. "Winter is no place for a new foal."

At that, Will smiles. "Animals are much better equipped to handle the seasons than we are," he replies. "But I agree; perhaps we will put them in my father's house, provided your animal does not go mad for us taking them away."

Hannibal huffs a laugh, and then straightens when he hears newcomers approach. He turns and smiles when he sees Alana, Margot, Francis, and Randall approaching them, and they greet each other with fond nods and warm embraces.

"Who would have thought, after everything, we would end up back here?" Francis says in greeting.

Will grins at him. "I ask you this instead; would you rather be elsewhere?"

"Never," Francis replies. He sighs, and settles against the fence as Will is, watching the horses. Randall shifts his weight, restlessly, beside him.

"Will," he says. "You said you had words for us."

Will nods, and turns around so his back is resting against the post. He folds his arms across his chest and looks at them each in turn, before settling on Randall, last. "You told me you had heard rumor of Roman ships on the coast," he says. Margot's eyes widen, and she looks to Randall in question, going pale when he nods. "None of them, though, have landed, yes? Except for trade."

"That is true," Randall replies. "Not that I've heard of."

Will nods. "Margot, do you think it likely that, if any of us were to show our faces in Roma, we would be recognized?"

"Me, yes," Margot replies with a nod. "And certainly your face, and Hannibal's, would be easily marked."

"So it would not be impossible to say these traders would know us, as well."

Alana frowns. "What are your thoughts, Will?"

"The gods have given me answers, in regards to who would run this village in my father's absence – a council, as Niamh said – and I believe that that course is what would be best for all of us. New people come in every week, and we grow in number and reputation with every season. I should not think it impossible to assume, one day, our reputation will meet our foreign friends on the shores, and they might venture further North to find us."

He huffs, and his expression turns somewhat bitter. "The bringer of rains and the man who slayed his master are not names easily forgotten."

Hannibal does not like it, but he cannot deny Will is right.

"It's been years," Alana protests softly. "Surely Rome has better cause than to hunt across the sea for a slave that, for all they know, would have perished."

"I would like to believe it," Francis says. "But I would not put my faith in such a dream."

Will tenses at the word, breathes out harshly, his knuckles turning white as his fingers curl and bury themselves in his elbows. "I have been having strange dreams," he whispers. "I see blood falling on the snow – I see death. It comes to me in snatches of air, like the wind. But I have not stopped seeing it since the year we spent apart."

He presses his lips together, and straightens. "I mean to go to Eblana," he says. "I would like to see these ships for myself – to talk to whoever steers them, if I can. I need to know what they know." Francis and Randall are already nodding, before he adds; "I would ask all of you to join me. To follow me, one last time."

"All of us?" Margot repeats, and looks to Alana. Her expression is steel-lined, as determined as she had been the entire time between their escape and their arrival here. She is a fierce woman, as wild with the nature of this land as Will is, and Hannibal can tell her decision has already been made. "What of Eoin?"

"Niamh can watch him," Alana says before Will can reply, and she looks to Margot. "He is of an age where he can survive without us for a week or so."

Margot is clearly unhappy with the suggestion, but she can see Alana will not be swayed, and so she sighs, and nods. "Very well."

Will swallows. "The snows may become impassable by the time we get there," he warns. "You may not see your son until they thaw. I want you with me, for I love you both dearly and would have you at my side, and follow me one last time, but I understand if you cannot."

"I will go," Alana assures him. "I will follow you."

Will nods, his gaze soft with affection for her, and then he looks to Randall and Francis, and he smiles. "I suppose I already have your answer."

"I was growing lazy with my travels," Francis replies with a grin. "I could make use of another interesting adventure."

Will laughs.

"Then we will go," he replies. "We must prepare quickly – the snows are beginning to fall, and once they start in earnest, travel will become difficult. Pack what you need. We will leave just before nightfall." They nod, and disperse, hurrying to their respective places to prepare for the journey. Hannibal smiles as he sees Bua trotting behind Francis and Randall, following them into the thick of the village.

"I think you could summon all of them to your side, if you merely asked them to," he murmurs lightly.

Will sighs. "Part of me considered it," he replies. "But an army is slow, and easily noticed." He turns, meets Hannibal's eyes. "Despite what you may think, war is not my intention."

"We are men of blood and war, my love," Hannibal replies. "War may not be your intention, but when you move, the beasts stir with you, and will follow you if you ask them to."

Will grins at him, his eyes bright. "Shall I summon the wolves from the mountain, and call them to hunt? Command the eagles peck out the eyes of Roman sailors, and for the sharks to butt their heads against their hulls? Or perhaps I will simply ask the ocean to eat them all and let the fish devour them as they see fit." He laughs again.

"You may speak in jest, but I have seen you hold lightning in your hands," Hannibal replies, smiling. "I do not think it's impossible for you to ask your friends for such things."

Will huffs, rolling his bright eyes, and turns back to the horses. He sighs. "Without your mare, we are an animal short," he says. "And my horse will not leave his mate, not even if I begged him to."

"We will have four," Hannibal replies. "Margot and Alana can ride together, and perhaps you and Randall, since you are the smallest."

Will laughs, loud with mock outrage, and smacks him on the shoulder. "You will not ride with me?" he demands, but there is mirth shining in his eyes. Hannibal smiles, catches his hand, and kisses his knuckles. "I refuse to share with anyone but my mate."

Hannibal shakes his head, and kisses Will's hand again. "Of course, darling. I would rather keep you with me also – I merely was thinking of the horse's back."

"I'm sure he will complain if he gets tired," Will replies. "There is a village on the coast a day's ride from here; he will not have to bear us both for long, for we can buy more animals there."

Hannibal nods, and then Will tugs on him, guiding him back towards the house so that they, too, can pack. Eoin runs past them, shrieking and laughing as he chases Bua's tail, and Will flinches, careful not to brush against the child as their paths cross. He breathes out, watching the child run from them, and when Hannibal meets his eyes, he merely shakes his head and ducks inside.

"How long will it be, before you feel safe enough to touch him?" Hannibal asks. "Perhaps there is some instinct lost on me in Hibernian blood, for he seems to understand – or maybe his mothers have taught him to avoid you – but surely you would like to show some affection for the child that, without your hand, wouldn't even exist."

Will winces again, and Hannibal realizes his misstep. He sighs, and takes Will by the shoulders, turning him around and making their eyes meet. "You didn't make Mason do what he did," he says firmly, making sure Will knows he is speaking the truth. Will blinks at him, his brow creasing. "Alana told me that Mason's attack on her was the night you killed Cordell – by the time your influence might have affected him, the damage was already done."

Will's eyes widen. He swallows harshly, and dips his gaze, wets his lips. "…When did she tell you this?" he demands softly.

"The night you held lightning in your hands," Hannibal replies, and touches Will's cheek, lifting his eyes again. He offers a small smile. "You had no part in his conception, my love, but his birth, and the life he has now – that was only possible because of you." Will blinks, his eyes turning, suddenly, so bright and sharp. "You are not a monster, Will."

Will breathes out shakily, his fingers flexing, before they curl against Hannibal's chest. He turns his head, nuzzling Hannibal's palm, and breathes in again as though taking in his scent. His eyes close, just for a moment, and he sighs.

"I thought…" He trails off, and Hannibal hums, leaning in until his nose touches Will's wild hair. He knows what Will thought – knows that ts has plagued him for years, since he first learned of Alana's pregnancy. "Sometimes, when I look at her, I see something red and pulsing, like a second heart resides in her stomach. The promise of life; a seed searching for something to wet it, and let it grow. Sometimes I wonder if she wants to be a mother a second time."

Hannibal frowns against his hair, wraps an arm around Will's shoulders.

"Would you give her that gift?"

Will shakes his head immediately. "Not me, no," he replies. "But it makes me wonder, all the same."

"Have you spoken with her about this?"

Will laughs, and draws back. He turns and pulls the first of their saddlebags from beneath a table by their bed, and begins to gather their clothes and place extras inside. Though it needs to be done, Hannibal cannot help thinking he is choosing to do so now to place some physical distance between them, the air sitting like a shield. It's an unpleasant thought.

"What would I say?" Will asks, and for all the lightness of his voice, there is tension in his shoulders. "Should I go to her and ask, 'Alana, my friend, do you want me to find you a man'? As I promised I would for Margot?" He pauses, his nose wrinkling, lips twisted down in a bitter snarl. "I failed her, in that regard, as well."

Hannibal sighs, and sits on the bed, mindful that if he were to reach for Will right now, he may not be welcomed. "There was a time I thought you intended Anthony for her," he admits. Will huffs, like the idea is ludicrous. Hannibal hesitates, and then adds; "You did find a man for her, in the end. I am technically her husband, and through the ritual of making her my wife, we were afforded the chance to escape."

Will pauses then, again, and looks up at him.

"Everything that has happened brought us here, Will," Hannibal finishes. "Whether it was an intentional decision on your part, or your magic guided by the will of the gods, or whatever else that makes men and women do what they do, I cannot bring myself to regret a single moment of it."

Will tilts his head, his eyes raking over Hannibal in a careful, considering way. "Nor I," he admits, finally, after a long silence. He stands, and goes to Hannibal, worming his way between Hannibal's knees, and bows down to cup his face, resting their foreheads together. "I think every life we lead together will be one filled with blood. The thought doesn't trouble me as much as it should."

Hannibal smiles. "There are people in this world who think an afterlife of war and triumph is the perfect one," he replies, his hands lifting, and settling over Will's strong back. Will huffs a laugh, and tilts his head, their noses brushing in an affectionate nuzzle. "What would be the perfect one for you, I wonder?"

Will laughs. "Somewhere by the ocean," he replies, and Hannibal nods, for he expected no less. "But I think no place exists that would suit me perfectly, for I want mountains, and forests, and sand as well. I want the skies always dark with rainclouds, and thunder and lightning, and I want sun also, so hot that it burns when not under the cover of the trees."

He sighs, and shakes his head, their noses brushing again. "Does such a place exist?"

"If you like, we can journey until we find it," Hannibal replies. Will blinks at him, and his smile is wide. "I told you, Will – I will follow you wherever you desire to go. We can find a sunny coast with wet winters and warm summers."

Will straightens, and lifts his eyes to the ceiling. Around their home, the wind whispers and brings another soft flurry of snow, blowing in through the small window that allows light and coating the edge of the sill. He smiles. "I think I would like that."

They are ready by nightfall. Alana and Margot are the last to arrive, and when they do, Alana tells them they wanted to wait until Eoin was asleep before leaving. The women take one horse, and true to his demand, Will insists on riding with Hannibal. The tall bay gelding that has been bearing Hannibal during his mare's pregnancy takes their weight with a complaining huff, Alana and Margot on the second gelding, and Randall and Francis taking the horses they brought with them.

No one gathers to bid them farewell, but that's alright. Hannibal knows Will spoke with Niamh to tell her of his plans, and he trusts in Will's people to govern themselves without them there. Will is warm and snug against his chest, his strong thighs and shoulders broad against Hannibal's body, and though it's a tight fit on the saddle, Hannibal would rather him be nowhere else.

They set a course South, and start their journey. Hannibal has not ventured this way for years, and yet the road rises up to them with a strange familiarity, as if he had been going down this path all his life. The moon shines brightly and reflects on the frost that has already begun to gather, lighting their way. They ride swiftly, taking the pace at Hannibal's and Will's mount's stride, as he is the one who is burdened the heaviest.

None of them speak, except when they pause for food and drink. Randall's horse is the one carrying most of the food, being the lightest burdened, and so they gather around his horse whenever Will calls a halt, sharing dried meat, fresh bread, and what is left of the vegetables and fruit from the harvest that they could reasonably take while still guaranteeing the village could survive through the winter.

Just past midnight, the sky turns very dark, and the storm clouds roll in with such a fierce, icy wind, that Will is forced to call another halt. They find shelter in a thick-clustered copse of trees, tie the horses close together so that they can share heat, and all huddle together under their thick blankets and cloaks while trying to keep their meagre fire going.

They sleep like a pack of dogs, all on top of each other. Hannibal and Francis, being the largest, take the outer shell of their group, Will against Hannibal's chest and Randall against Francis', Alana and Margot curled up and sheltered under their heat. It calls to mind some of the fonder memories of Hannibal's past, during his time as a soldier, when the nights on patrol turned very cold and they were forced to share space to survive the frigid hours.

The sun does little to warm them, when it rises. Still, the snow has stopped falling, and Hannibal sighs and shakes off his cloak, seeing with dismay that there is already a soft layer of snow upon the ground, quickly accumulating. He looks to Will, finds him watching the skies with a faintly concerned frown. But then Randall, Francis, Alana, and Margot rise again, and he shakes the expression away and plasters on a wide smile.

"Come, my friends," he coaxes gently, and they mount their horses and ride on.

The first village they come across is a farming town, though there are no animals and no fields lush with harvest, since it will have already been taken and stored for the winter. They enter on foot, knowing a group their size on horseback would be difficult to navigate within the narrow paths and the densely-packed houses, built to protect the innards from the wind and rain.

Will leads the way, confident as ever, and they approach a group of three women sitting outside one of the larger houses, chatting animatedly. Hannibal would guess at least two of them are related, with their similar hair color and shape of their faces. They go quiet as they all approach.

"Well met," Will greets, bowing his head and putting his fist over his heart. The oldest women, who has grey streaking her hair and deep smile lines around her mouth and eyes, mimics him and repeats the greeting back. "My name is Will – I come from a village a day's ride north of here."

The older woman's eyes flash, and she tilts her head. "Will," she murmurs. "Is Shannon your mother?" Will blinks in surprise, and nods. "I knew her, when I was a child. How is your father?"

"He passed, a few weeks ago," Will replies, and the woman presses her lips together, nodding once, eyes soft with sorrow. "He was old, and went peacefully." She nods again. "My friends and I are traveling South, to Elbana, and we were hoping to perhaps borrow an extra horse from you, if you are able to part with one."

The woman hums. "For how long?"

"For the season, most likely. I doubt we will be able to return before the snow falls in earnest."

She hums again. "Perhaps we can," she says slowly. "The harvest is passed, and we can spare a mount."

Will smiles at her. "We have only some things to trade, but if you are willing, when the spring comes and we return, we have a colt who was born this year. You can take him and your mount back as payment with interest."

At that, the woman's eyes brighten with intrigue, and she nods with another smile. "That will suit," she replies, and turns to one of the younger girls. "Aileen, we will let them take the grey mare, since she is not with a foal. Go fetch her." The girl nods, and stands, brushing past them with a smile. Hannibal does not miss how her eyes linger on Randall as she passes.

The woman gestures to Will, and pats the spot beside her where Aileen was sitting. "Come, come sit with me," she says, and Will smiles, and obeys with a single nod, taking a spot. For lack of anywhere else to sit, Hannibal takes one of their blankets and spreads it out in front of the women and Will, and the rest of them sit on the cold ground while they wait. "I think I would know you were Shannon's boy just by looking at you," she says warmly, and offers her hand. "I am Cathleen."

"It's good to meet you," Will replies. He gestures to the rest of them. "These are my friends. Alana, Margot, Randall, Francis, and Hannibal."

Cathleen nods to each of them in turn, but land last on Hannibal, and sharpen. Hannibal cannot fault her for that, for there is an undeniable softening of Will's voice when he speaks his name. "Hannibal," she repeats, and frowns. "I have heard your name."

Hannibal blinks in surprise, and tilts his head.

"My son," Cathleen explains, and looks to Will, "he was just in Eblana not even a week ago. He told me there have been Romans looking for a man, with a brand on his arm and in the company of he who brought the rains to their deserts."

Will presses his lips together, and nods. "That's why we're traveling that way. We wanted to hear the rumors for ourselves."

"Is your son here?" Hannibal asks. She shakes her head.

"No. He does not live here, but out West, with his family," she replies. He nods in acceptance of that. She hums, and lifts her chin. "But it's true, then? The Romans are hunting for you."

"I daresay they would like to have all of our heads," Alana says softly, earning Cathleen's gaze. She lifts her shoulders in a shrug. "We are no friends of Rome."

"Mm." Cathleen looks over all of them again, and puffs out a breath. "I daresay you all have quite the story. Perhaps when you return with payment, you will tell it to me."

"Gladly," Will says with a smile.

At that moment, Aileen returns, dusting off her hands. "I have prepared the mare," she tells them with a bright smile. "I left her with your animals on the edge of the town."

"Thank you," Hannibal says, and they all stand, and he rolls the wet blanket back up and secures it with his bag. "We are in your debt."

She nods, and reaches out to touch Randall's arm. "Don't be strangers," she says with another bright smile, and Hannibal does not miss how Randall flushes, ducks his head, shifting his weight. It's strange, he thinks, to see a man who is just as fierce a warrior as any of them, be

so demure and blush at the touch of a pretty girl. He hides his smile, and Will bids Cathleen and her girls a fond farewell, and they go back to the horses.

Francis is not so tactful as Hannibal is, for he nudges Randall's shoulder and gives him a bright grin. "It seems you caught someone's eye," he teases, and Randall's blush darkens. "She is quite beautiful. Perhaps we will make a native of you yet."

Margot laughs. The mare they have bartered for stands against the bay gelding Hannibal and Will rode, and lifts her head, ears forward and attentive, eyes bright with intelligence. He greets Will with a bluster, as if she was waiting for him, and Will smiles and touches her soft muzzle.

"Hello, beautiful," he murmurs, nudging his forehead to her cheek. She lips at his hand and swishes her tail. By an unspoken agreement, since Alana and Margot are so much slighter, Will takes the mare and leaves Hannibal alone on the bay, and they return to their designated horses, mounting them and turning them towards the path that leads out of the village.

"Come," Will calls, trotting to the head of the line. "We must do our best to outrun this storm."

Even as he speaks, the clouds rumble above them, like a dog when catching sight of a rabbit and eager to give chase. They dig in their heels and ride on.

When the sun is just starting to set, Will calls a halt again, and they set up their camp next to another cairn, that sits beside a single stone hut that is large enough for them to all curl up in, and the air quickly warms with all their body heat pressed together. Will's eyes shine, a muted gold touching the edges of his pupils, and as they are finished securing the horses and unloading their blankets and cloaks, Hannibal touches his arm to draw his attention.

"There is gold in your eyes again," he says, and Will nods, pressing his lips together. He eyes the darkness of the doorway, the tight-fit hut illuminated by a single lantern since they cannot risk a fire, pressed so close. There is nowhere else for them to feasibly find shelter, and so if Will denies him, Hannibal of course will not force the issue. Will knows his hunger and his body better than Hannibal ever could.

Will looks up, and breathes out. "I am hungry," he admits, and Hannibal nods. "But I can wait."

"I can offer you my wrist, if you need it," Hannibal replies. He would, of course, never assume that Will's hunger could only be sated with sex. He conjures a fierce desire in Hannibal, and Hannibal is always willing, but he is not so proud as to demand Will spread his legs just for the sake of his own wants.

Will smiles, and turns to him, nuzzling over the most recent bite he left on Hannibal's neck, after they were finished speaking to his mother. "You're so eager to give," he breathes, hands

flattening on Hannibal's chest. "I could take as much as I wanted from you and you would simply beg for me to take more, wouldn't you?"

"I would rather live to see it sate you, but yes," Hannibal replies with a laugh, curling a hand through Will's hair. "I spent most of my life knowing that it was up to the whim of weak men, to use and discard it as they saw fit. Offering my life to you is much sweeter."

Will smiles, and pulls back, his eyes bright. His head tilts, and he presses his lips together, breathes through his nose, a soft and considering look coming over his face.

"I wonder," he murmurs. "If you leave this life before I do, would you offer it to me then? As my father did?"

"Of course I would," Hannibal replies, easily – for it is an easy thing to say. But he means it. "Was there any doubt?"

"Doubt? No." Will shakes his head. "I suppose I don't like to think about it. But it pleases me nonetheless, to hear you say so."

Hannibal smiles, and Will lifts to his toes to kiss him, taking his hands. "Come. Let us join our friends." Hannibal nods, and allows Will to lead him into the small stone hut. Francis and Randall make room for them, so Hannibal's back is to the door, and they are all enfolded in the intimate space as it closes.

Margot sighs, and looks up guiltily at Will's curious sound. "I miss Eoin," she admits, looking sheepish.

Will nods, soft with understanding. "If you'd like, I can ask my friends to speak to him." She blinks at him, eyes widening, and Will smiles. "I do not know if they will, or if he will even listen, but I can try."

"I'd like that, Will, thank you."

He nods. "When the rain comes," he says. Alana presses close to her side, offering comfort in her embrace, and Margot sighs again. Hannibal wraps his arm around Will's shoulders as Will sighs, tucking himself beneath Hannibal's arm. In Will's presence, he does not feel the cold, but he can see the rest of their little troupe shivering under the onslaught of winter as she starts to bare her teeth in earnest.

Their journey from Elbana, when they first arrived in this land, happened so long ago; "How many more days until we reach there?" he asks, for he does not remember.

"Three, if we ride swiftly," Francis replies, reaching into his bag and taking out a thick wrapping in which lies pieces of dried meat. He passes them out to the rest of them, though Will refuses to eat it with a small shake of his head. Hannibal kisses his hair, and tears off a mouthful of his own ration. "Three if we don't."

"It troubles me that your reputation has spread this far North," Alana murmurs. "Both of yours. And that the Romans have begun to venture in far enough to ask for you. We may be

recognized on sight."

"There is nothing we can do about that, except be cautious," Hannibal replies. Alana nods, frowning heavily. "Speak, Alana – share your thoughts with us."

"Perhaps it would be wise if you and Will did not enter Eblana," Alana says. "Not at first, anyway. Until the rest of us have gathered more information."

Hannibal presses his lips together. The suggestion clearly doesn't sit well with Will, either, though he does nothing more than tense in Hannibal's arms. Hannibal looks to Francis, Randall, and Margot. "What are your thoughts on this?"

"If there is to be a fight, I'd rather have you at my side," Randall replies. "And yes, it is true that your names and faces are more known than ours, but that does not mean we would not be similarly targeted. After all, Francis and I bear our old master's brand." He nods to Alana. "You, the mark of your domina. We are recognizable as foreigners. Splitting up and blinding ourselves to each other's movements is not a good strategy in war."

"Hear, hear!" Francis says, grinning around his mouthful of meat. "Besides, would you rather enter a strange place with the gods on your side, or without?"

Alana sighs. "I will admit, the particulars of fighting are not as known to me as all of you," she says quietly. "But I know people – I know how to look for things more subtle than that. How to spot when a child moves too quickly into an alley, or people turn their backs and whisper to each other in soft voices."

"Then it's a good thing you are with us," Francis says. "You are only proving Randall's point – we are stronger together."

Will hums, and straightens, and Hannibal's hand slides to rest at his back. "My mother told me that one straw too many will break a horse's back, and yet at the same time, one flower cannot be called a garden, and one stone cannot be called a cairn. I think I am starting to understand what she meant, now." He looks to Alana. "We are stronger together, and I doubt Rome is going to be waiting for us with an army."

At that, Alana huffs a reluctant laugh.

Will's head tilts. "Are you afraid?"

"Of course I am," she replies. "You would be a fool if you weren't."

"I am not afraid," Francis says.

She laughs again. "My point is clear."

Hannibal smiles, as Francis huffs and rolls his eyes. Will is watching Alana closely, and he bites his lower lip, and reaches for her. He is sitting closest to her, and so doesn't have to go far. He clasps her at the wrist and she blinks at him, but returns the gesture, her fingers curling around Will's forearm.

Will doesn't speak, but Hannibal watches as Alana's eyes darken, the black in them spreading out to overtake all of the blue. Will smiles at her, the same smile Hannibal has not seen for some time, but remembers with sharp clarity; it is the smile he wore before he took a life, when he called 'Rejoice!' and opened the skies for the rain to fall.

Above them, thumber rumbles, and Alana shivers visibly.

Will pulls back after a moment, his eyes shining with gold, and Alana gasps, rubbing the wrist he touched as if he has burned her. Will looks up, turns towards the door, and smiles widely. "The rain is here," he whispers, just as Hannibal hears the first heavy drops start to fall. Will stands. "What message have you for Eoin?"

Margot looks up, her eyes wide. "Just that we love him, and we miss him, and we will return soon."

Will nods, and then touches Hannibal's shoulder. "Come with me," he commands, a strange franticness to him, and Hannibal rises to his feet. Unlike other men, Hannibal does not find discomfort in the idea of stepping out into the freezing storm – it is Will's rain, and Will warms him like no other. Will smiles, and looks to their friends. "Rest well. The morning will come sooner than you think."

With that remark, he leaves, and Hannibal follows.

Will laughs as they emerge, immediately soaked with the cold water as it beats down upon them. Lightning streaks across the sky and Will lifts his hands, laughs along with it, and Hannibal shivers, more out of reflex than anything else – that, and the sight of Will in this element of his, so alight with joy, never fails to warm him from the inside.

Will takes his hand and draws him towards the cairn. "What did you do to Alana?" Hannibal asks, too curious to resist asking the question.

Will smiles. "I showed her her future," he replies, like this is something men can simply do. "Eoin, much grown, and all of us around her to greet her second child." He laughs again. "How it came to be, I don't yet know, but what's life without some mystery?"

"More and more interesting, when you are involved," Hannibal replies, but he is smiling also, unable to resist being affected by Will's joy.

Will hums, and they approach the edges of the cairn, the rocks dark and slick and the moss shining whenever the lightning blinks at them. Will reaches, testing the structure – it is very old, moss and dirt deep-webbed through the stones, so that even the tip of the structure seems stable, and does not wobble or move under his hand.

He turns once his appraisal is done, the gold in his eyes a blisteringly bright ring now, and he pulls Hannibal to him by the edges of his cloak and kisses him. "Mount me here," he demands, thunder in his voice and storm clouds in his eyes. Hannibal gasps, moaning into the kiss as Will drags his hands down to Hannibal's tunic, pushes it up and slides his warm, wet hand beneath his clothes to grip his cock. Hannibal flinches, breathing out harshly against Will's slick neck, but Will's power quickly warms him, floods him with heat, and he growls

and pushes Will down to the base of the cairn, turning him so that Will is on his knees and Hannibal can cover him.

"No," Will snarls, and snaps his teeth together. He rolls them so Hannibal is on his back, Will astride his thighs, and he snarls again, baring his teeth, his eyes shining as Hannibal pulls at his clothes to bare his opening. He lets Will's tunic and cloak fall over his legs, to shield him, and Will sighs, moves forward with a small grunt of effort, and tilts his head up to the sky.

"I need to feel the rain," he whispers, so soft and sweet, totally at odds with the way he had snarled mere moments before. Hannibal swallows, unable to keep his eyes fully open for how heavy the rain is, and Will sighs, sliding his hands up to grip the stones on either side of Hannibal's head. It's not comfortable, the rocks digging into his back rather sharply, but then Will spreads his thighs and Hannibal's fingers find his dry opening. Wet with rain as he is, he can slick Will's hole well enough, and pushes one finger inside.

Will shivers, a small, weak moan catching in his throat. He bows his head, hair flat to his skull and dripping icy water down onto Hannibal's chest, his neck. He leans down further and kisses, his mouth warm and opening to allow Hannibal's tongue to taste him.

"I want to kill all of them," Will confesses, breathing the words against Hannibal's mouth as Hannibal works a second finger inside him. He gives no sign of discomfort, but then again, he rarely does. Hannibal would rather be gentler with him, go slow, but Will is impatient when he's hungry, alive and snarling under the cover of the rain. "Every Roman dog I see. I want them to know they should not dare put their dirty touch on my country."

Hannibal shivers, cups Will's neck with his free hand and kisses him harshly. "If it were in my power," he replies, "I would put you before the Emperor himself and watch you devour him whole."

Will smiles, at that, off-kilter and pleased. He digs his nails into Hannibal's neck and rakes down with a snarl. "I would," he replies. "I would open his belly and feed on whatever came out while he screamed." He sighs, and rears up again, tilting his head back to wet his face with the rain. "I'd command wolves to devour his soldiers, tell the trees to lay themselves down on their camps, ask the ocean to rise up and destroy their ports, their ships, anything the sea would like to eat." He shivers, and looks down at Hannibal again, and Hannibal has no idea if the Roman gods do truly exist, but looking at Will as he is now, he cannot doubt that whatever power lingers in this land, Will is a true manifestation of it. He is in awe. "The lightning would set their houses on fire, the rains would ruin their fields."

He sighs. "I want all of it, Hannibal."

"Do you have the power to make such a thing happen?" he replies, for he cannot deny that if Will were to say 'Yes, I do', Hannibal would believe him.

Will smiles. A streak of lightning breaks across the sky, arcs down and touches the tip of the cairn, bathing Will in its silver glow. Hannibal gasps, feeling the sharp heat from the rock, the lightning making his heart shiver and stall in his chest – but it doesn't hurt. He does not feel it like he should.

Will growls, suddenly, and yanks on Hannibal's arm so he's forced to take his fingers out of Will. He moves, and grips Hannibal's cock with his wet hand, and angles himself so that he can sink down onto it. It takes only the entry for Will to finish, tensing and crying out, his thighs tight around Hannibal's hips as he shudders, trembling as though freezing.

Hannibal groans, always taken so strongly by the feeling of Will, warm and tight around him. Will's eyes flash, shining with silver as they did the last time he held lightning in his hands, and he falls over Hannibal with another snarl, pawing at his hair and biting at his lips.

"Open," he commands. "Open for me." Hannibal does, allowing Will to lick behind his teeth, into his mouth. This feels different – laying with Will is always wonderful, his eagerness and his fierceness unmatched to any other feeling Hannibal can name; when he is sweet and desperate, when he is confident and snarling, he is beautiful. But Will kisses him like Hannibal is his next meal, and the power pouring out of Will is nothing short of absolute. Hannibal feels it, coiling in his stomach, surrounding his heart like molten metal. He is no longer tired, no longer cold – the rain and the rocks mean nothing to his body, there is only Will. Will, kissing him and rolling his hips, forcing Hannibal deeper inside him, clenching down so tightly Hannibal feels like he's suffocating.

Will pulls back, resting their foreheads together. He's panting, and shows his teeth. "That's it," he whispers, and dips his fingers to spread through the mess he left on Hannibal's stomach. He pushes them between Hannibal's lips, salty and warm, and Hannibal licks them clean. "Yes. Take it. Open for me."

He pulls his fingers back out, and kisses Hannibal with teeth, snarling against his mouth. Hannibal grips his hips fiercely, moans as Will claws at his neck and his shoulders, rides him rough and fast.

He cannot name what the feeling is, that suddenly rises in his chest – he can only say that it is strong, and has teeth. He snarls against Will's mouth, grips him and rolls him, forcing Will onto his back and lifting his hips so that Hannibal can push back into him. Will arches, moaning, clawing at his hands as Hannibal yanks on Will's tunic, pushes it up so his belly is bared to the rain, and Will shivers, a sound almost like a sob spilling from him.

"Please," he whispers, and looks at Hannibal, and his eyes are all the colors Hannibal has seen; blue, and silver, and gold. He leans down, shielding his mate from the rain just for a moment, a sudden possessiveness for it overcoming him before he can stop it, and he kisses Will roughly, forcing his lips to part so Hannibal can claim his mouth.

Still, it is not enough. Will writhes beneath him, soft, desperate noises stuck in his throat. Hannibal wants to let them out – he sees them, caged behind Will's teeth, his neck, his pale skin. He tilts his head and finds Will's pulse and bites down savagely, much harder than he has ever marked Will before. He bites until he tastes blood.

Will cries out, gripping him, one hand on Hannibal's nape so he can't pull away. He shudders, coming again, and Hannibal purrs in delight, rutting his belly against Will's cock as it spills and coats his skin. The tightness of Will's spasming body, the taste of his blood, the burn of him in his skull, lights Hannibal on fire, makes him feel as though he is made of steel and flame. A beast, a monster, just like his beloved.

He tongues at Will's neck and Will whimpers, tilting his head to bare more of it, and Hannibal snarls, and bites again, overcome with the need to do it. Another bolt of lightning illuminates them, touches down on the cairn and Hannibal watches it arc through the stones, into Will's chest. Will moans, and wraps his legs around Hannibal's waist, and digs his claws into Hannibal's chest.

He digs in, through the fabric, and Hannibal gasps as he feels Will's nails break skin over his heart. He shudders, and Will trembles with him, tightens his legs and sighs.

"Hannibal," he whispers. "Please."

Hannibal growls – no, *no*, he doesn't want this to end just yet. He wants Will to come again, wants more of his lightning, his fire. He doesn't want this feeling to end. He kisses Will in answer as Will pets through his wet hair, and Will is suddenly so sweet, so gentle below him. He has always been a powerful man, strong and capable, but under Hannibal's body he feels starkly soft, spent and weak.

"Please," Will whispers again. He tugs on Hannibal's chest, quite literally, his claws still embedded deep. His eyes shine, gold now more than anything, betraying his hunger. "I'll take as much as you want to give me. Please."

Hannibal snarls, unable to tell Will '*No*', unable to make his tongue and lips form the words he wants. How strange, that he does not feel as helpless to Will's command as he normally does. He is nothing but a beast, and acts like it, operating only on instinct and desire, and he does not desire to leave his mate quite yet.

Will shivers, biting his lower lip. Hannibal wonders if there's something showing on his face, for Will looks up at him plaintively, and curls a hand around the back of his neck. "Hannibal," he says, "before the storm moves on. Finish it."

Finish *what*? He wants to ask, but cannot make himself speak. He growls, and closes his eyes, grips Will tightly and grits his teeth, nosing at Will's sluggishly bleeding neck. Will moans for him, arches against him, eager and encouraging as he always is, his hands leaving Hannibal's chest and wrapping around his shoulders.

"Fill me," he commands. And Hannibal is, once again, helpless but to obey.

He presses as deep as he can, shoving Will against the rocks, and comes with a loud growl, a sound that feels like it rumbles through every inch of his body. Will moans weakly, lashes fluttering, one last streak of lightning coloring the sky as he goes lax, clinging to Hannibal tightly as Hannibal floods him.

The pleasure lingers, cresting like waves that rob Hannibal of strength. He is suddenly weak, shivering with cold, and buries his face in Will's neck, seeking Will's warmth. He is, also, very abruptly *starving*. He licks over Will's neck, and that tastes good, so he does it again, angry at the rainwater that seeks to wash him clean.

Will smiles, and slides his hand between their bellies again, coating his fingers with his seed, and lifts it to Hannibal's mouth. "Eat," he purrs, and Hannibal parts his lips, sucking them

down. That tastes good, too, and eases the throbbing of his empty stomach.

He licks at Will fingers, and Will smiles, dropping his hand to offer more. Hannibal takes it eagerly, his body spasming as he releases another load into Will, watches his eyes shimmer and darken, the gold ebbing now that he's well-fed. There's Hannibal's blood on Will's fingers as well, caked beneath his nails, and he licks those clean too.

Will sighs, and tilts his head back, his throat deeply marked by Hannibal's teeth. Hannibal lets his fingers go, lets out a soft, concerned sound, and thumbs at the edges of it. Will smiles, unflinching, and lifts a hand to the sky.

Hannibal follows his gaze, and gasps, for beyond the clouds, though they are thick and dense and still pouring down rain, he can see the moon, and the stars, as if the sky was clear. He looks down at Will, and sees not only that beautiful blue, and the ring of gold, but starlight in his eyes.

"What have you done to me, Will?" he breathes.

Will looks at him, and cups his face, and laughs. "Something I thought impossible," he replies. His other hand presses to Hannibal's stomach, tender and light. "You are mine – my equal in all things."

He leans up, and Hannibal pulls out of him with a wince, shivering in the cold as Will corrects their clothes. He cups Hannibal's face and kisses him deeply, and before Hannibal always felt it as a warm, absent kind of pleasure, but now it strikes him fiercely, as if Will has lit a fire in his chest. It brings with it hunger, and need, to the point where if Will spread his thighs and asked for Hannibal again, he might be able to give himself.

Will pulls back, and Hannibal gasps when he sees, reflected in Will's eyes, a brightness to his own that was not there before – a ring of silver, shining like the stars. He lifts a shaking hand and touches Will's cheek, feels the thrum of life and power within him, echoing like a cavern inside his own chest.

Will smiles, lashes fluttering as Hannibal drags his fingers to Will's bitten neck. He tilts his head, baring more of it, and though the rain ebbed for a while, Hannibal feels another rumble of its brother, close behind.

"I know you're hungry," he whispers, and cups Hannibal's neck. "Take. I am willing."

The words hold power in them, Hannibal knows this, but he is unprepared for the way his gaze sharpens, his upper lip twitches to bare his teeth, and he lunges for Will, burying them in his sweetly offered neck. He pushes Will's thighs apart again, and Will laughs, moaning soft and high and clinging to Hannibal as Hannibal mounts him, and above them, the rain begins anew.

Chapter End Notes

my my my what has Will done now...

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal wakes well-rested, and a little sore – which he supposes is nothing surprising, given that he and Will did not move from the cairn until very early in the morning, after the storm had passed for good. He is also terribly, terribly hungry. The same kind of hunger that plagued his belly when he was first drafted into the army. The kind that clawed at him and showed its teeth to him, making itself known, when first he became a gladiator and they thought starving their men was a good way to break their spirit.

His mouth is dry, his throat weak and hoarse as if he had spent the night screaming – but perhaps he had. He and Will had stayed outside the little stone hut, bathed in rain and lit with lightning, Will's cries echoing his own baser chorus as Hannibal took him, and gave in return, only to take again.

His eyes feel – not quite tired, as though suffering from strain. But heavy. All of him feels heavy, and hungry. He can taste blood in his mouth. He cannot make his eyes open, but he becomes aware, in increments, of his surroundings. First, the orange glow of sunlight behind his closed eyelids. Second, the whisper of the wind through the wet grass, the way it tickles him, and drips rain on the stones that have made his pillow and bed. He has always felt the life in this land, but suddenly awareness strikes him like a thunderclap, like the lash of a whip – he can hear things he cannot remember hearing before. Laughter, in the raindrops that cling to the edges of the thatched roof of the hut. Soft sighs as the wind curls around the stones and touches his face.

Behind him, soft breaths and a steady heartbeat. Will.

He turns, blind and seeking as a newborn, and finds heat in Will's bared neck. Will is warm, and wet, his curling hair easily pushed out of the way by Hannibal's nose as he fits his teeth, and lips around them, to the series of marks he left on Will's throat the night before. They are still both mostly-clothed, knowing that though they need not fear the weather, there is something to be said for preserving their modesty around their friends.

He paws, without direction, no intent except to pull Will closer to him, and Will goes with a sweet, gentle sigh. He doesn't know if Will is awake, but by all the gods, he's warm. He's warm and strong and Hannibal thinks he can feel every pulse of his heart, every string of muscle quivering in place as he rests. Every piece of bone, line of sinew, arch of his lungs against his ribs. Hannibal feels it, and cannot describe the instinct for what it is, that tells him to dig in with his teeth and suckle at Will's neck like a nursing child.

Will stirs again, breathes out against Hannibal's shoulder. There's a hand in his hair, Will's thigh worming between Hannibal's. "Take," he whispers. "I am willing."

Just as they did the night before, the words strike something harsh and desperate inside Hannibal's chest, like a great war beast that has felt the trumpeting call to charge. He snarls,

and pierces Will's neck with his teeth, his jaws locking to trap flesh between them, and Will gasps, a soft moan caught in his throat, as Hannibal bathes his tongue in Will's blood.

It tastes good. It tastes phenomenal – heat and life and the spice-scent of Will's love for him. He knows it is love, he knows it like he knows the compass points and the shine of the evening star and how a sword fits in his hand. He pushes himself against Will, still blind, still seeking, and snarls as he presses Will onto the ground, smells the wet mud and shivering grass part for them, yield like he might be able to bury Will in the earth with nothing but his bare hands.

He drinks, and drinks again, gasping when Will sighs, and flattens a hand over Hannibal's eyes. He robs Hannibal of the orange of the sun, lets him think it's safe to blink and stare, and Will turns him, gently guides him from Will's neck, and cups his hands around Hannibal's eyes like blinkers on a horse. Their foreheads touch, and Hannibal meets his golden gaze.

"I know it hurts," he whispers. Hannibal cannot speak, can only taste Will's blood in his mouth and feel the awful hunger in him snarl, angry at being denied. Will presses his lips together, something almost guilty flashing behind his beautiful eyes, before he tilts his chin up and their mouths meet. Hannibal growls against him, clutching him at his back, his flanks. He feels Will's heat, his power, pouring into him like he's drinking molten metal. It's not as nourishing as Will's blood, but it settles the beast in him that is so ravenous, gentles the burn of the sun on the backs of his eyes.

When Will pulls his hands away, Hannibal can open his eyes, and gaze at him.

Will smiles, and lifts his head for another gentle, chaste kiss. "Do you feel it?" he whispers, and takes one of Hannibal's hands, curling both his own around it, and rests it against his heart. "Listen. Open yourself to me. Do you feel it?"

Hannibal looks down, presses his palm flat. Will's heart beats powerfully within his chest, as though it wants to claw its way free of his body and find rest in Hannibal's hand. Even through their clothes, Hannibal is so *aware* of Will, he feels if he commanded his mouth to smile, Will's lips would twitch in answer. If Will tried to run, Hannibal would be right beside him, keeping pace.

"What have you done to me?" Hannibal breathes, and even as he speaks, Will's lips move in mimic, though he makes no sound.

Will smiles, and Hannibal feels the corners of his mouth tilt up, of their own accord – or maybe just of Will's accord. Will squeezes his fingers, wets his lips, and Hannibal's mouth feels slick in answer. "I made you like me," he says. "I didn't know it was possible, but I felt it, last night. Felt how you opened, and allowed me to fill you. I…" He swallows, and Hannibal's throat tightens. Will's nails drag down his hand, measuring and marking the tendons and veins, and Will cups his wrist with one hand, slides down over his forearm and touches the innards of his elbow with the other.

"I asked the gods to give me the power to make Rome tremble," he says, finally, and lifts his eyes. "But I cannot do it alone."

And Hannibal thinks he might finally, finally understand. "So I am truly yours," he replies, for he can think of nothing else to say. Will's eyes brighten with joy, gold shining in them, and Hannibal can see silver reflecting back from his own iris. Feels, in his own chest, a flutter of Will's happiness. How monumental could it become, he wonders, if they simply built upon each other? If Will smiled whenever Hannibal was happy, and sensing his happiness, Hannibal answered in kind, and it grew, and grew, until they burst with it.

He meets Will's eyes, and sees the answer. Happiness, wrath, bloodlust…. All of it, theirs to build upon within each other so that they can conquer the world.

"Will," he breathes, and Will gazes up at him, so alight with love and pride and satisfaction in equal measure. Oh, gods, how Hannibal loves him. He sees it take a hold of Will, blacken his eyes and stutter his breath, and Will bites his lower lip, releases his arm and slides his hands up to Hannibal's chest.

"Take," he whispers. "I'm willing."

Hannibal shudders, showing his teeth, pushing at Will's thighs until they spread for him again. He pulls Will's clothes away, presses his fingers to where Will is still open and wet, sore and hot on the inside. Will gasps, arching back, his lashes fluttering to half-mast as Hannibal pushes into him with two fingers.

"How can I feed you, if I'm taking from you at the same time?" Hannibal asks. Perhaps they are destined to become monsters together, to feast on the flesh of any animal and man they come across, and acts such as this will truly become something done simply for pleasure, for intimacy, as mortal men do.

But Will smiles, sighs, slides his hands down and works Hannibal's cock free from his clothing, tempts him with the sweet spread of his thighs and the arch of his spine. "Let it build," he whispers. He reaches up with one hand, curls it around Hannibal's nape. "Kiss me."

Hannibal obeys, falling over Will with a growl as he withdraws his fingers and lines up his cock instead. Will moans into his mouth as Hannibal penetrates him, and in this, they are the same as well – Hannibal feels it, as Will's body parts for him, yields to him. He feels the ache in his body, the fullness and heaviness he is giving to his mate, even as Will clenches around him and draws him deeper. He feels how his mouth bruises Will's lips, feels his weight press and pin, even as he clings to Will and lifts him into his thrusts.

He feels how empty Will is, feels his hunger. He wants to sate it. He wants to take it and pull it into his own chest and crush it between his ribs. Will kisses him and claws at his nape and clings with his thighs, and it builds – Hannibal inside Will and Will all around him, gasping soft, desperate moans to his mouth, his insides clinging to Hannibal and urging him onward.

Will ends the kiss, licks Hannibal's jaw, gently coaxes him to Will's bitten neck. "Kiss," he commands, and Hannibal does, sucking another dark mark on Will's sweaty, flushed skin. Will tastes divine, his blood so sweet and warm as Hannibal digs his teeth into the mark he just left and reopens it, coaxing more blood out. Will spasms, ruts his cock against Hannibal's belly. "Open for me."

Hannibal isn't sure how – except he is, he is, he feels it in his stomach like a wound. Gaping, raw and dripping. He snarls and lets Will touch his stomach, lets him press on Hannibal's flesh. He yanks his shirt up so Will can feel bare skin, and Will trembles for him, gasping again as their skin connects.

There's too much inside him, suddenly. He feels what Will feels, struck deep and aching, rearing up high over his mate as he snarls and fucks Will brutally, driving him against the mud and the stones. He presses in, coming with another low, rough sound to Will's neck, and feels how Will blossoms with it – his heat spikes, his muscles clench, he feels suddenly so full.

Hannibal pulls back, abruptly, and hauls Will higher up, into a lax and off-kilter crouch, and bows his head so he can suck Will's cock into his mouth. He's never done this for another man, but Will's fingers thread through his hair and tighten. He snarls, showing his teeth, and fucks in, and Hannibal pushes his fingers to where Will is dripping and open for him, working what's slipped out back into his mate, wanting him full. He wants Will bursting with him.

Will curls over him, stomach tense, and spills down Hannibal's throat with a sweet cry, his hips and thighs twitching as Hannibal swallows all of it. It soothes the hunger in Hannibal's chest, coats his insides and sates him, and Hannibal moans softly, dragging his fingers between Will's legs and cupping his balls, coaxing Will to spill all he can down Hannibal's throat.

Will pulls him off, gasping heavily, his knees hitting the ground hard, and for a moment they simply rest, muddy and wet and panting, Hannibal's forehead against Will's thigh, Will curled over his shoulders as he breathes against Hannibal's cloak. Will is still twitching, leaking even as he softens – Hannibal knows how it feels, how the pleasure lingers like lapping waves on the side of a cliff. He nuzzles Will's thigh, licks the crease of his hip where he's bare and salted with sweat, and coaxes Will to unfurl for him, rising on his knees so he can capture Will's mouth in a kiss.

Will swallows heavily, his eyes glazed – but, Hannibal notes, lacking gold. Hannibal fed him well, and he's been sated in return. His stomach clenches with an absent, mortal hunger, more habitual than anything else, for it's easily ignored, and as he licks Will's blood and seed from his teeth, he can feel it ebb.

Will goes lax, sighing, resting his forehead against Hannibal's. Then, he laughs – like he does in the rain, joyous and thrumming with life. And Hannibal wants to laugh with him; Will's euphoria bubbles in his chest, makes him feel invincible, powerful, like he could slay all of Rome all by himself.

The grass shivers, bowing beneath the weight of the wind, which sighs and makes itself at home in their hair, between their gasping mouths, teasing at Will's bare thighs and Hannibal's exposed stomach. He swallows, and touches Will's cheek, and feels a flicker of warmth on his own skin in answer.

Will smiles at him, as sweet and full of adoration as he always is, and kisses Hannibal chastely. His hands untangle from Hannibal's hair, and he reaches down to pull Hannibal's

shirt back into place, tuck his softened cock back in, and then corrects his own clothes.

"I can't wait for you to see the ocean as I do," he murmurs. Hannibal swallows, and lifts his eyes to the sky. The clouds seem to smile at him, moving with a shimmering silver light, promising rain. The sun, beyond them, bright and happy. He can even see some remnants of the stars, gone to sleep and glowing dim, but visible. It is no wonder Will is so happy, when all the world looks like this.

"Perhaps between the two of us, we can convince it to feast on Roman flesh."

Will's eyes flash, darken, glow with something wild and hungry, and Hannibal knows, in that moment, that this is precisely Will's plan.

Francis emerges from the hut a while later, and while he doesn't comment on Hannibal and Will spending the night out by the cairn, it's clear from the grin he sends them that he was waiting for them to finish with each other before coming outside. Hannibal is not ashamed – why should he be? There is lightning in his veins now, fire in his heart. Were they back in Mason's ludus, he would happily take Will in the middle of the arena, if Will asked him to.

"Are you hungry?" Francis asks, and Hannibal has to tilt his head, and realize that no, he isn't. He doesn't think he's been this sated in his life. Will shakes his head, smiling, and yet he rises, and comes to help Francis light the cooking fire that will provide them breakfast.

Hannibal goes back inside, to help pack up the bedding so they can attach everything to the horses, when everyone else is finished eating.

Alana and Margot are still asleep, or at least dozing, for they stir and straighten when he enters, as though just waking up. Alana frowns up at him. "Did you spend the entire night outside in that storm?" she asks, like she cannot believe it.

Hannibal smiles, and nods, bowing down to help Randall roll the blankets and cloaks he and Francis had used to remain warm and dry. "The rain doesn't affect me like that anymore," he tells her. "It hasn't for some time – not when I'm with Will."

Randall looks at him, like this news surprises him. "What does it feel like?" he asks.

Hannibal lifts his shoulders in a shrug. "Like…life," he says simply. "I'm warmed by it. Will is in the rain."

Randall's eyes soften, and he smiles, looking down at the bedding as they finish rolling and tying it into a thick bundle. Outside, Hannibal hears Will laughing, and his own chest clenches and flutters with joy. Alana and Margot rise, repositioning their clothes and cloaks, and Hannibal helps them roll their own bedding up as well, and they carry it all outside. The fire has been lit, and Francis is roasting strips of pork atop it, the smell causing a curious lack

of reaction in Hannibal – food doesn't seem nearly as enticing to him now, when he has tasted Will.

Besides, the meat is dead. There's nothing nourishing to it anymore.

They secure the bedding to the horses, and gather around the fire to wait for their meal. Francis dishes out the last of the fresh bread, and then gives Randall, Alana, and Margot some of the meat, as well as himself.

Alana looks to Hannibal again, seeing that he is not eating, and she frowns. "Aren't you hungry?"

"Not at all," Hannibal replies easily. He smiles when her frown deepens. Beside him, Will hums, and gives him a fond smile, nuzzling his shoulder. In answer, Hannibal wraps an arm around his shoulders.

Alana's eyes darken, her head tilts. "What happened?" she demands, looking at Will.

Will hums again, flattening his hand across Hannibal's thigh, and he straightens so he can look at them. "My friends," he murmurs, and they all straighten, attentive as a pack of hounds, eager supplicants to hear the words from their god-like friend. "Something happened last night. I felt the change of it, in the air, in the rain."

He pauses, and sighs through his nose. "I think I am able to share my power with all of you. To give you all the strength to be as I am, if only for a little while."

Francis frowns. "What do you mean?"

Will smiles, and looks at Hannibal. "We are the same, now," he says gently, tightening his grip on Hannibal's thigh. "I didn't think it was possible, but here he sits – to feed, and see the world as I do."

In his periphery, Hannibal feels Alana's gaze on him.

Will looks to them all again. "I love all of you dearly, but I am not as deeply bonded with any of you as I am with him. As well, I could not give you the power the same way I give it to Hannibal – so it won't last forever. But it would be enough, if we reach Eblana and see the Romans are on her shores, to give us the strength and purpose for what needs to be done."

"We would become…" Hannibal can tell Randall hesitates on the word 'monster'; "Creatures, like you?"

Will nods.

"Not forever," he says again. "Just as if Hannibal and I were to part from each other, eventually my power in him would fade. So, too, will this be only temporary. But you would not feel pain, or cold, or fear like mortal men and women. You would not suffer injury – you would be made strong, by devouring those that sought to harm you."

"How?" Alana asks.

Will sighs, and looks to the sky again. "The rain will come," he says. "And the snows, following close behind us. It will rain, the night before we enter Eblana." He says this with the same assuredness he always does when speaking of the future, and Hannibal can see that he is believed. "When it does, I ask you to join hands with me, and let the lightning touch you. My power will come to you through it."

Francis huffs a laugh. He does not look worried. "True titans, indeed," he murmurs, and Hannibal remembers how Mason called them as such, so often, so many times. As if they were truly of the Roman demigods, and possessed powers beyond mortal men. He is one of those, now – and with Will's gift, they might all be.

"I will warn you," Will says. "Even though it will be only a temporary gift, the bond between us all will remain when the rest has faded." He presses his lips together, and Hannibal squeezes his hand. "This will not likely be the last life we share, if you all join me in this."

Margot frowns, tilting her head.

But Alana is smiling. "I would walk through several lives with you, Will, as your friend," she says kindly. She is sitting on Will's other side, and reaches out to touch his shoulder. Will smiles at her, and his free hand covers hers, and he lowers his head to gently touch his nose to her knuckles.

"You do not need to decide today," he says, and rises. The rest of them follow suit, and Francis pours some water on the fire, killing it with a cloud of steam. "Come, we must ride swiftly, if we are to reach Eblana in time."

They journey for three days, and every night Hannibal feels the urgent pull of hunger in him, echoed by the rumble of thunder and the heavy downpour of rain. They find shelter for the first two nights, but he and Will do not share in it, instead finding heat and each other in the darkness. Will opens for him readily, cries to his neck and whispers, 'Fill me' and 'Take, I am willing', and Hannibal cannot honestly say he does not devour Will in every way except the literal sense. He buries his teeth in Will's neck, his cock in Will's body. He drags his nails down his mate's flanks and drinks him down when Will arches and shudders against him. He consumes Will, as ravenous as the monsters whose legends plagued his youth, and Will drinks his fill of the rain, takes Hannibal's offering in response to it. By the time they reach Eblana, Will's eyes are a blistering gold – not with hunger, but with power, and anticipation.

The final night, they are camped on a small hill. There is no shelter, but Will looks to the sky, and smiles. Hannibal can see the ocean, gleaming beneath the light of the moon that shines, even through the dark clouds. It shimmers and moves like the scales of a great beast, beautiful for how many blues there are within it – more than he saw before Will changed him, he knows this. There are as many shades of blue and green in the water as there are in Will's eyes.

Margot shivers, by his side. "It has been so long since I saw him hold lightning," she whispers. "Yet I remember it as though it were yesterday."

Hannibal smiles, and puts his eyes on Will. Will, with his face upturned, his hands lifted to the sky as the first drops of rain begin to fall. He laughs, and then pulls out the small knife he carries in his belt, and slices both his palms open, his dark blood welling as he cups his hands and lets it form a pool, watered down by the rain.

"Come," he tells them, and they gather around him. He touches Hannibal, first, drawing his fingers over Hannibal's wrists, across his forehead, and his nose, and then his mouth. Next, Francis, and he draws two marks beneath each of his eyes, and one down the center of his neck. Randall next, he cups Randall's throat with both hands and gives him bloody handprints.

Margot, he paints at the wrists, and down her shoulders in three faint lines on each arm. Alana is last, and he cups her face, and kisses her forehead – a gentle brush of lips that makes her tense and tremble. When he pulls back, he places his red thumb against the skin he kissed, and smears it between her brows.

Then, he lifts his hands again, and lets the rain seal his wounds, stopping the flow. With what remains, he smears his mouth into a savage brand of blood, licks his fingers clean so it seeps between his teeth and into his gums. Hannibal can taste it in his own mouth, and licks his lips.

The first strike of lightning hits the horizon of the ocean, thunder rolling in a moment later. The rain starts in earnest, throwing itself at their faces. Hannibal is not cold, and he can see the rest of them are no longer shivering – their eyes shine with a silvery glow, reflecting the moon and her smile upon the water.

Will laughs. Loud, long, he laughs, and the lightning brightens them all. Hannibal can see ships docked at Eblana's port, several of them with large red sails bearing the seal of Rome. His upper lip twitches in a snarl, and he sees Will's expression echo similar anger.

"It begins now," he whispers, and begins to prowl down the hill. "Come, my friends – we must not stop until it is finished." Hannibal follows, and the rest fall in line behind him. How often had he marched upon a town with his fellow soldiers, knowing that it would end in bloodshed? For at that time, even a small battalion of Roman soldiers could slay an entire village, and Rome cared not for the preservation of the people it conquered. It was before things like settlement were considered, when the only goal was the pillage and destruction of the lands she decided to invade.

There is no one out on the streets, as though they sense the monsters all descending upon the town. Hannibal, Francis, and Randall have swords. Will needs no weapons, though he still has his knife, and Alana and Margot begin to move as he does, with hunched shoulders and sharp eyes.

Will pauses, in the middle of one such street, his head tilted. Lightning cracks above them, peering down upon them like a curious cat, eager to lunge for the mice in its sights. Hannibal

growls when Will lifts his head, breathes out, feels a flickering echo of Will's power in his chest.

"Francis," he whispers, and looks to the other man. "Take Randall and go to the docks."

Francis nods, like he needs no further instruction – perhaps he doesn't. Perhaps he can feel in whatever power Will gave him what he must do. He and Randall part from them with a brush of their shoulders, disappearing into the night. The thunder roars with readiness.

"Alana," Will says. "Take Margot and go to the brothels."

Alana nods, and takes Margot's hand, leading her away as well.

Hannibal presses his lips together, tasting blood when Will turns to him. "What would you have me do, my love?"

Will smiles, and cups his face, kisses him once, gently. "Come with me."

The storm has begun in earnest by the time Will leads him to where he intended to go. There is a small square, absent of people, small awnings billowing in the fierce wind, the ground wet and dark with the rain. Will lifts his head, and smiles up at the sky. "Can you see the moon, Hannibal?" he asks. Hannibal nods, for he can, even through the darkness of the storm.

He hears, near them, the braying of hounds. Will's head snaps to one side, towards the noise, and his eyes narrow. He prowls to a single archway, bereft of a door, and they step inside. There are cages in this place, of wild-looking wolfhounds and hunting dogs, all of them snarling and pacing in their cages as though they have just heard the call to hunt. Some of them have collars that bear the symbol of Rome on them.

Hannibal's eyes widen, as he sees a familiar shape. No, it cannot possibly be -. "Bua?" he murmurs.

Of all the animals, Bua is the only calm one. His jaws are parted, and he looks like he's smiling.

Will goes to his cage, and the thick metal lock upon the door breaks at his touch as if it were made of paper. The door swings open, and Bua pads out, huffing in greeting. Will kneels before him, cupping his shaggy muzzle, and rests their foreheads together.

"Would you like to hunt with me, my friend?" he murmurs. Bua licks his nose, and then at the smear of blood around Will's jaw. Will laughs, and stands, freeing the other dogs with the same ease. They all lunge from the cages, snarling and snapping their jaws, crowding around Will and Hannibal with furtive, eager whines.

Hannibal sees another flash of lightning outside, hears something fierce and loud, like some large tree has been struck from its moorings.

"Go find our friends," Will murmurs, and Bua leads the charge, the pack of dogs braying and howling as they are lost to the storm.

"Will," Hannibal breathes. But he knows – Francis and Randall are at the docks, disposing of any Roman soldiers resting on their ships. Margot and Alana, taking advantage of their bodies and their loveliness to tempt and slaughter Romans while they mount native women in this place. And Will leads the call of the wild.

Will smiles at him, and takes his hand. "We must hurry," he says.

Hannibal nods, and they rush to the edge of the town, where there is a single, small cliff. The waves crash against it, the wind roaring around their bodies and snapping at their faces. Hannibal looks up to the sky, finds that there is lightning touching down all around them.

Will squeezes his hand, and points to one of the ships. It is on fire, its mast struck and laying to one side, crushing a second ship and making it sink. There are panicked cries, dark shapes moving around the fire. He sees, in flashes of darker-than-dark, animal-like shapes prowling behind the soldiers as they flee, felling them with strokes of sword and swipes of claws.

"Shall you command wolves to devour the soldiers, and tell the trees to lay themselves down on their camps, and ask the ocean to rise up and destroy their ports, their ships, anything the sea would like to eat?" he asks, echoing the words Will gave him the night he gifted Hannibal his power.

Will's eyes flash, his upper lip twitches in a feral-looking snarl.

"And sharks will butt their heads against their hulls, and eagles will peck out their eyes, and the fish will devour them as they see fit." He breathes out, and looks at Hannibal. He's beautiful, the light from the fire highlighting the gold in his eyes, the rain making his hair black and slick against his face. He smiles. "You gave me this power, Hannibal – I could not have even dreamed of it, without all that you've shown me."

Another streak of lightning hits one of the ship masts, and there is a chorus of howls and loud yells. The few who do manage to escape the ships fall under Francis and Randall. If they make it past their friends, Bua and his pack devour the rest.

Will takes his hand again. "There is one more thing we must do," he says. "Promise me you will do what needs to be done."

Hannibal frowns, but before he can ask, Will is already turned away, pulling him to follow. "Come with me."

They go back to the courtyard, to find Margot and Alana, both of them panting and soaked with blood. The storm has begun to gentle, the lightning and thunder moving on in their game of chase, and in their wake, the air has grown very cold. Snow has begun to fall – fat flakes

of white that coat the ground, quick and eager to gather. Hannibal does not feel the cold, but he can see that Margot and Alana have begun to shiver. The rain washed the blood Will gave them from their faces, and in its loss, they are becoming mortal again.

From the direction of the docks, Francis and Randall emerge. They are similarly red, blood dripping from their drawn swords, their open mouths. The women turn to them like wolves welcoming the hunting party home, and Francis and Randall draw their cloaks up, covering their shoulders and shielding them from the snow.

Will walks on, to the single other presence in the courtyard. It is a man, dark-skinned and large, a giant in his own right. Hannibal's eyes widen in recognition.

"Jack," he says, and Jack looks up at him, his eyes a black void of anger, his face grim and set. There is blood at his temple from a blow, and Hannibal knows that if Alana and Margot had not been given Will's power, there is no way they could have gotten him here on their own.

He looks to Will. "He survived?"

Will nods. "I was too weak to hunt him down," he replies. "After Mason."

Jack snarls, and spits on the ground at Will's feet. Will smiles, his teeth and eyes shining in the reflection of the moonlight off the snow. He comes forward, and crouches in front of Jack. Hannibal tenses, for Jack is not bound, and there's a dagger tucked into his belt.

"Well, Jack," he murmurs, and reaches out to touch the man's cheek. Jack bares his teeth, snaps them together aggressively. "You found me."

"Is this the part where you eat me?" he spits. Hannibal blinks, momentarily startled to hear Latin after so long without. How strangely coarse the language seems, when he has been surrounded by Will's mother tongue for so many years.

Will smiles, and shakes his head.

"We should," Francis snarls. He is trembling too, in the cold, the high of the fight and Will's power leaching from him.

Will shakes his head again, and sighs, falling to his knees. "No," he says. "He still has a part to play in all this."

He smiles, and looks down at his arm – he stopped bandaging the wound Hannibal gave him, and after so much rain and Hannibal feeding him so well, the place where his brand was is merely a patch of off-color skin, edged with a raised line of scar tissue. He looks back at Jack, and reaches with his injured arm, cradling the man at the nape of his neck. Jack tenses, and Hannibal tenses too, as Will leans in and whispers something in his ear.

Jack yells, lunging upright, and grabs his dagger. Hannibal is too far away, and cannot react before he has pulled it, and plunged it deep into Will's belly, angled up to strike at his heart. Hannibal feels it, a sharp pain that ensnares his senses and makes his vision go black.

He reacts on instinct, rushing forward and hauling Jack away from Will as Will chokes, blood welling up in his mouth, and falls to his knees again. He doesn't hesitate in sinking his fingers into Jack's overgrown hair, yanking his head back until he hears a *snap*, and sinking his teeth into the man's thick neck. Blood, hot and alive, floods his mouth, and Hannibal snarls, clawing at Jack's chest as he gurgles and flails. He drops the dagger, and Hannibal bites again, ripping out his throat.

A pound of flesh comes with it, and driven by some instinct, some need that still feels so new to him, he bites again, tearing out another chunk. And another, as Jack convulses and goes still. Yet another, as the body falls to the ground.

"Hannibal."

It is his name, the soft call of Will's voice, that clears his vision and stops him in his tracks. His eyes widen, and he turns from Jack as he bleeds out into the snow, rushes to Will and falls to his knees in front of him.

Will coughs, clutching at his belly. Jack's dagger did not stay lodged within it, and so his body pours blood in a thick, steady stream, coloring the ground red. Hannibal swallows, for the wound is deep and he can feel, in his own chest, the ache of his heart as it tries to beat. Can feel where the dagger sliced through his lungs and tore open his flesh.

"Hannibal," Will whispers, and sighs.

"I'm here," Hannibal replies. The others have crowded around them, and Alana kneels down first. She presses her hand to Will's sweaty, bloody cheek.

"Take," she whispers. "I am willing."

Will closes his eyes, bows his head. The wound has stopped gushing quite so heavily, but Hannibal knows that it's not because Will is healing. There is no power in the snow. He grips Will's neck fiercely, makes him lift his head.

He kisses, drinking the blood from Will's mouth, and tugs on the thing that binds him to Will. Feels where they are connected, where their lust and their happiness and their affection builds upon each other. It feels as though Will's presence is a burst dam, quickly losing water, but the pieces are there. Hannibal just has to rebuild it.

He takes Will's dagger and opens his wrist, pressing it to Will's mouth. "Take," he says. "I am willing."

Margot comes forward, and kneels next to Will. She covers the wound where his brand was with her pale, small hand, and whispers, "Take. I am willing."

Randall, next. He puts his hand over Will's wound and says the same. Francis, last, as he crouches against Alana and Will's tongue licks tiredly at Hannibal's wrist. Francis puts his hand on Will's warm neck, and says the same words. Will convulses, breathing in raggedly, his eyes closing again. He doesn't react, but Hannibal will not be deterred – he feeds Will as

much as he is able, rebuilding the broken pieces of the dam as Will goes very pale, and very still.

"Will," Hannibal whispers, watching Will's blood drip through their fingers, falling on the snow. Part of him would smile, for it seems Will's vision did, indeed, come to pass. But he could not have fathomed it happening this way.

He rests their foreheads together, breathing out shakily, and cups Will's cheek with his free hand. "Will," he says again. He lived through losing Will once – he is certain he could not survive it a second time.

The breeze stirs, and Hannibal hears the rough panting of a dog. It is Bua, and he pulls back just enough for the dog to penetrate their little circle. The dog whines, and licks at Will's lax face. Licks again, and Will's lashes flutter. His head turns, and he coughs again, more blood dripping from his mouth.

The wind whispers to them, and Hannibal can hear it. He knows Will can hear it too. *Take, Will. He is willing*.

Hannibal presses his lips together, and grabs Bua by the scruff. He bares the dog's throat and slices a tiny line along his neck, and Will gasps when Bua huffs, stepping over Will's leg, letting him close. Will's hands shake, but rise, cupping Bua's shoulders and wrapping around his neck.

He parts his jaws wide, and sinks his teeth into the dog's thick fur. Bua sits, huffing again and licking his nose, as Will drinks from him. With every pull, Will appears to get stronger. Hannibal doesn't relent, however. He presses his hand next to Randall's over Will's wound, wills as much of his energy into Will as he can, until he does begin to feel the cold. Until he shivers with it, and his breath begins to mist. The snow falls, coating Will's hair, his shoulders, shrouding them in white.

Will breathes in, suddenly, coughing again, and releases Bua. The dog yelps slightly, stumbling out of their circle, and lies down in the snow. He doesn't appear to be drastically harmed, but Randall stands and goes to him, covering the dog with his cloak and petting over his thick scruff as he pants and whines.

Hannibal turns back to Will, reopens his wrist as Will moans, and lifts it to his mouth. Will's lashes flutter, and open to half-mast, revealing eyes the color of molten gold. He snarls, and grips Hannibal's wrist fiercely, sinking his teeth into the tender flesh on either side of the open wound, and starts to drink.

He drinks – loud, slurping noises as Hannibal braces himself, gritting his teeth. Alana, beside him, shivers and sags, and Francis catches her, looking similarly weakened. Margot has to take her hand away as well, wincing and pressing her fingers to her head. Will drinks, and keeps drinking, until Hannibal's heart flutters like a caged bird in his chest. Until his vision turns grey at the edges. Until his hands shake and his breath is coming in frantic gasps.

The wind touches his cheeks, plays in the wet tangles of Will's hair, and Will releases him with an unsteady inhale, choking around his mouthful of blood. There are tears in his eyes,

and they fall, gathering the red from his cheeks as he falls to his hands and knees. He cradles his own throat as Hannibal holds him upright, and opens his eyes.

Then, he smiles. And he laughs, and drags his bloody fingers around the red streaked across the white.

"Rejoice," he breathes, and Hannibal curls around his body, shields him from the cold and the wet, as Will's body trembles with another soft, shaken laugh. "It is finished."

It takes Will eight days before he recovers completely. Bua is vanished, as if he was never there, and Alana, Margot, Francis, and Randall sleep for almost two days without waking. Hannibal remains, the most alert of all of them, though he is tired and starving. They hole up in an inn where the innkeeper is the kind of man willing to look the other way for the right amount of gold and the perfect level of threat. Hannibal keeps them warm, cleans them, finds fresh clothes and warm blankets for them. He sells all the horses except the mare they borrowed for enough money to make food for them, and when Francis and Randall wake, they go through the burning and abandoned ships, pilfering whatever gold and jewels they can find to further trade with.

The snow does not stop falling. On the eighth day, when Will wakes, the sun finally starts to shine.

Hannibal is with him when he rises, the rest in the village – Francis and Randall find work in the blacksmith's, for they will have to find a way to feed and clothe themselves while they wait out the winter here. Alana pledges to work off their debt to the innkeeper by working in the inn, since she is used to that kind of work, and Margot has made use of herself with one of the families who live on the shore, mending their nets and helping them negotiate the frosty ocean to fish for mussels and crabs. No one remarks on the sudden disappearance of all the Romans. They are superstitious folk, those odd men from across the sea, and it seems fitting that they would be so afraid of storms. Hannibal hears them laughing about it.

Will breathes in, pale and warm in his arms, and Hannibal lifts his head, brushing a curl from his face. Will sighs through his nose, looking suddenly so much older than he is, and turns his head to meet Hannibal's eyes.

Still, when he smiles, it is the same, and Hannibal feels his own lips curl in answer. Will lifts a trembling hand, weakly brushing his fingers down Hannibal's face, and sighs again. Hannibal helps him roll onto his back.

"Are you hungry?" Hannibal murmurs. "It has been cold enough that I have managed to keep the meat raw." He has been eating a lot of raw meat himself, for while Will nourishes him, he would never do his mate the dishonor of touching him while he slept, of taking the energy Will so clearly needs to heal.

Will shakes his head, pressing his lips together. He looks down at his belly, flattens a hand across the short, stark scar there. It is still an angry red, blister-hot. He sighs again and tilts his head to the ceiling, closing his eyes.

His brow creases in a fine frown, and he licks his lips. "Is everyone alright?" he murmurs.

"Yes," Hannibal replies. "What do you remember?"

"I remember…the lightning," Will breathes, opening his eyes again, staring upwards. "I remember Jack. I remember you holding me as the snow fell."

Hannibal nods, wrapping an arm gently over Will's chest, pressing his face to Will's hair. "Of all the risks in life, I think you might be the thing that sends me to my grave," he teases, hoping to draw another smile out of Will. It works, and he huffs a tired laugh. "I thought I was seeing my life end, when Jack attacked you."

"He did what he was destined to do," Will replies. "And you…" He wets his lips. "You ate him."

"Pieces, yes. There wasn't time to eat as much as I would have liked."

"I'm sorry."

"Will." He cups Will's face, makes him turn his head. "I regret nothing, for you are here, and alive, and safe in my arms. The rest of it doesn't matter." Will smiles, his lashes going low. He's still clearly exhausted, and Hannibal looks up, eyes Will's dagger sitting by the bed. "Would you like my wrist?"

Will nods, and Hannibal rises long enough to grab the blade, opening his wrist and offering it to Will. Will cups his arm with one gentle hand, fits his mouth over the wound, and drinks. He doesn't take much, but it's enough to bring a small flush of color to his face, and brighten his eyes.

He smiles again, licking his teeth clean, and lets Hannibal go. "When I'm better, I'll feed you," he promises. "And when the snow thaws, we can go home. We'll tell our story, and maybe it will spread across the ocean, and the Romans will think twice about coming this way again."

Hannibal smiles.

"I'd like to go home," Will murmurs, closing his eyes. "I think…. I think now that I have you, I can hold Eoin." He swallows. "And you can, too. We can be his family – his uncles, with Francis and Randall." Hannibal's smile widens, and Will's lips twitch in mimicry. "He'll be safe with us."

Hannibal nods, and kisses him gently. "Rest," he coaxes, and Will obeys with another sigh, closing his eyes and tucking his face into Hannibal's neck. Hannibal embraces him tightly, simply relieved to feel Will's breath and the gentle pulse of his heart. He buries his face in Will's hair, and outside, more snow falls.

By the time spring comes, it is as though the whole business is a distant memory. Will shines with life, eager and vibrant under the promising light of the spring sun, and they have enough money for them to buy a second horse, and a cart to attach to them.

They come upon the village where Cathleen lives, and find her with Aileen only, the second girl nowhere in sight, sitting on a bench, content to enjoy the warm day. Hannibal and Will remain behind while the rest ride on to fetch the promised colt. Her eyes open, and brighten in recognition when Will approaches.

"Ah!" she says in greeting. "I was wondering if we would see you soon."

Will smiles at her. "My friends are traveling onward, to gather what was promised you," he tells her, and she nods. There is no room on the bench for them to sit, but the ground is dry and warm, and Will and Hannibal sit down in front of her.

"That is not all that was promised," Cathleen says with a smile. "I believe I am owed a story."

Will grins. "And I will give it. But you must promise me something." Her head tilts. "Tell this story to everyone you meet. Travelers, family, offspring. Let all of Hibernia know the story of what happens when Romans dare to touch upon our shores."

Cathleen hums, and looks to Hannibal. Her eyes flash. "You seem much changed, friend," she says.

"I am," Hannibal replies.

She smiles, and turns her gaze on Will again. "Well, he who brought the rains to the desert across the sea, tell me your tale."

Will smiles, and reaches out to gently take Hannibal's hand in his. He laces their fingers together, and takes in a deep breath.

"Four years ago, I boarded a ship that had a course set across the sea…"

Chapter End Notes

annnnnnnnnnnd there we have it, folks! I hope you guys liked my soft magic murder clan going out and destroying people :D
and don't worry, Bua's fine! ~~~magic~~~.

See you in the next fic!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!